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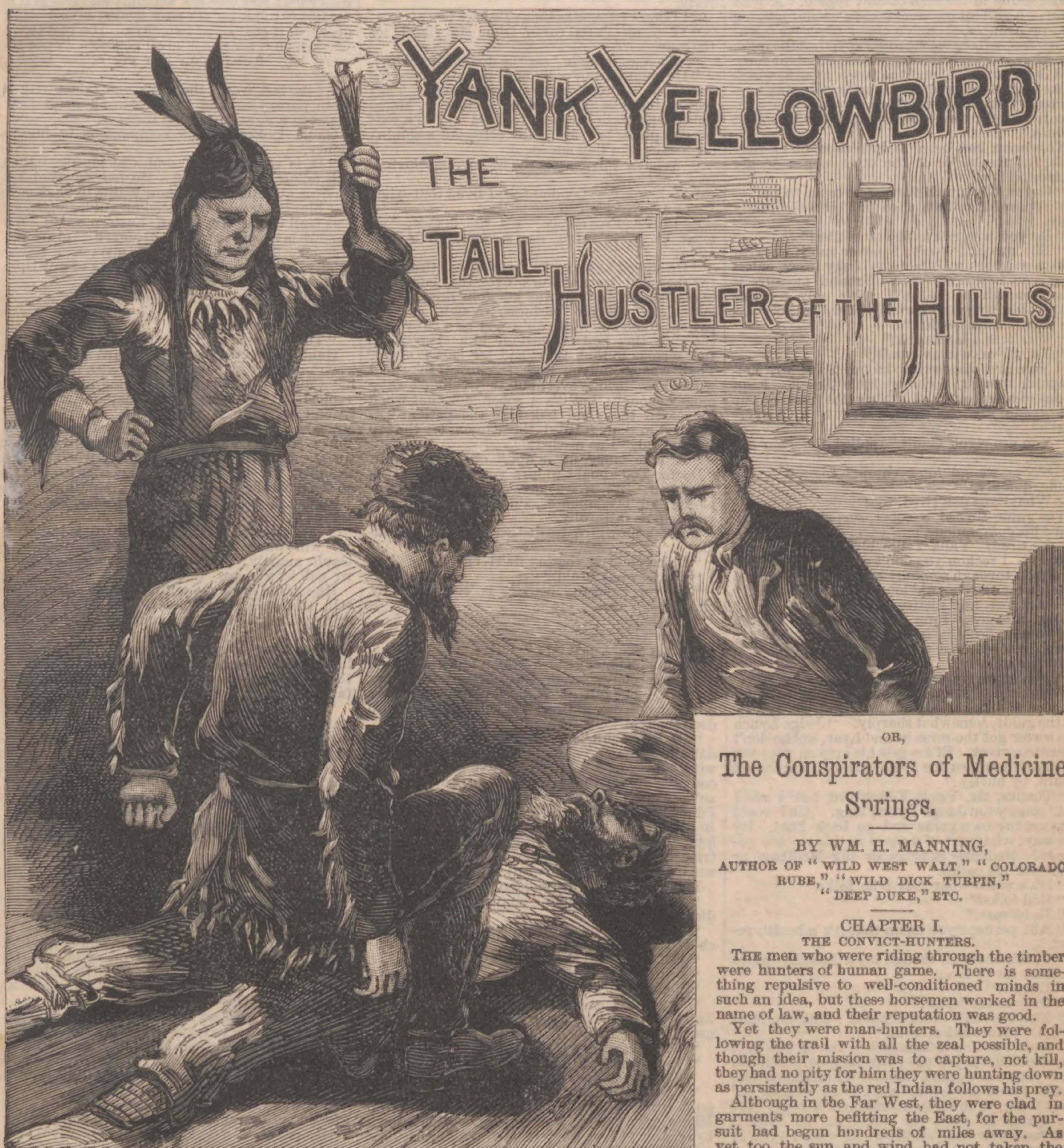
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A MAN WHO DID NOT BELONG THERE LAY FLAT ON HIS BACK WITH YANK YELLOWBIRD COMPOSEDLY SITTING ASTRIDE OF HIM.

OR,  
**The Conspirators of Medicine  
Springs.**

BY WM. H. MANNING,  
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "COLORADO  
RUBE," "WILD DICK TURPIN,"  
"DEEP DUKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONVICT-HUNTERS.

THE men who were riding through the timber were hunters of human game. There is something repulsive to well-conditioned minds in such an idea, but these horsemen worked in the name of law, and their reputation was good.

Yet they were man-hunters. They were following the trail with all the zeal possible, and though their mission was to capture, not kill, they had no pity for him they were hunting down as persistently as the red Indian follows his prey.

Although in the Far West, they were clad in garments more befitting the East, for the pursuit had begun hundreds of miles away. As yet, too, the sun and wind had not taken the delicate color of city life from their stern, official-looking faces.



They were three in number, but a fourth man was there—one very different from them in appearance.

He who rode at the front was plainly a man of the West, and a veteran at that. This was to be seen in his garb, his plain, worn weapons, and in his easy manner. He was quiet and unobtrusive, yet his whole air was that of a man thoroughly at home.

He had evidently seen about forty-five years of life, but Time had been very kind to him. His face was somewhat wrinkled, but not a gray hair could be found among his flaxen-hued locks, and his whole form seemed to be as tough and hardy as well-seasoned wood. He was tall and somewhat slender, but his chest was full and his limbs large and muscular, without any superfluous flesh. In fact, he was blessed with less of flesh than the average, being decidedly of that formation commonly called "bony."

Perhaps he expected an increase of avoirdupois, for his garments were so large that they hung upon his gaunt frame with striking disregard of fit and size.

His face was tanned to an extreme of color, and was far from handsome. His cheek-bones were too high for beauty, his nose too large, and his gray eyes too small. His hair had not recently been trimmed, but as it was thin and perfectly straight, it only covered the back of his neck with a flaxen veil; and his light-colored beard was by far too sparse for dignity or good looks.

A plain, honest, homely man he appeared to be, and not one fit to represent the West in the estimation of those who look for what is wild and dashing in the men of that region. A poor kind of a gallant he would have made, judging by appearances, though a closer observer might have seen, after prolonged survey, that the mild, placid gray eyes had a suggestion of latent force and determination, and the large mouth, which looked good-natured and contented, was supported by square jaws which gave a further indication of firmness which circumstances might arouse.

This man had been in deep thought as they rode, but the leader of the other men suddenly addressed him.

"Guide, how much further have we to go?"

"Five mild, or sech a matter," was the ready reply.

"Do you measure as the crow flies?"

"Not much, I don't; I never interfere with the crows, nor any other sort o' sky insex, onless they run afoul my rifle. Ground measure is good enough fur me, an' I refer only ter this trail. Jest five mild from a yaller blade o' grass we passed back yender."

"Was that a landmark?"

"No; it was a grass mark."

"You are disposed to be facetious, Mr. Yellowbird, though I feel very little like it. I am about wearied out, and I think the rest of our party can say the same. How is it, Chickering?"

"You are right, Gault," replied the man addressed.

"S'pose we go inter camp?" suggested the guide, quickly.

"What! are you tired, too?"

The guide turned a sober, surprised face toward his companions.

"Me tired? Yank Yellowbird tired? Land o' Goshen! I reckon you don't exactly know me. I've been through so many storms an' calms, so many long marches an' long camps, an' so many triberlations an' distresses, that I never git played out now. I am impervious ter all the ills human flesh is heir to—all but newrol'gy. I'm a great sufferer with newrol'gy; I do hev it most egregiously!"

"I judge so, by your looks."

"Mister, ef I may offer a word o' advice, don't set yerself up as a jedge in this kentry!" retorted the guide, somewhat sharply. "Jedge Lynch has sorter got the reins 'round hyar, an' he don't tolerate a rival. Ef he gits his grip on you, yer family will mourn the loss o' one o' their cosset lambs, by hurley!"

"Thanks, Mr. Yank Yellowbird, but I shall not tempt your Judge Lynch long. All I want is to get my own game and go back East. By the way, what sort of a place is this we are going to? Medicine Springs, or Big Medicine, or whatever it's called."

"It's a place whar they b'ile folks."

"Boil folks?"

"To be sure."

"Ah! perhaps you mean that it's a health resort."

"That's about it, though it's a healthy place ter keep away from."

"Rough?"

"Only in the b'ilin'."

"For heaven's sake, explain. You are hard to draw information from."

"I ain't got no inflammation, but ef you hev, Big Medicine is jest the place fur you. Tell 'em how you're in trouble, whether it's inflammation, brain fever, dropsy, or a gunshot wound, an' they'll flop ye inter the Springs an' b'ile ye. It's an egregious place fur b'ilin', an' the b'ilin' is warranted ter cure all ills in all stages—yes, or on hoss-back, either, for that matter."

"I think I have heard of this place," said Chickering. "Isn't it run by a Doctor Todd?"

"Todd is the master-b'iler, though a critter named Nelson Langleigh runs the town an' owns pooty much all on't. Take Todd an' Langleigh, an' throw in Montclair, who runs the hotel, an' you hev nigh about all the brains Big Medicine kin' boast on."

"I judge that you are not favorably disposed toward this trio."

"What makes you think so?"

"Your manner is not complimentary to them."

"I ginerally d'liver my compliments by word o' mouth, as I may say; but as ter the Springs, I consait that Doctor Todd did one job thar that was a good 'un. He had up a chap who was 'flicted with pneumonia an' old dirt. Ef he wa'n't an unwashed sinner I never seen one, fur he had so much o' Mother Earth plastered onter him that you couldn't tell whether he was American, African, Chineese or Tottenhot."

"A good subject for the Springs."

"Mebbe, but ef the Springs could 'a' chose their company, he wouldn't hev gone in, by hurley! Even Todd was jubous as he looked at the critter, an' he was afeerd o' a landslide when they got the dirt started. Hows'ever, they put the critter a-b'ilin', an' kep' him thar two hours. When he come out some o' the dirt was gone, an' he had changed color amazin'."

"You uster live in Arizony," sez the doctor.

"How d'ye know that?" sez the patient.

"Your present outside coatin' is Arizony sand," sez Todd. "Go in ag'in!"

"The critter went in, an' they b'iled him two hours more. When he come out he was red as an Injun, an' the doctor looked him over narily."

"I don't recognize that s'ile," sez he.

"I think it's red earth from Maryland," sez the man.

"Then go in ag'in," sez the doctor, quickly.

"He went in, not only once, but six times, an' come out dif'rent colored ev'ry time. They traced the s'ile o' Kentucky, Californy, Maine an' Alaska plain enough, for he'd laid on a coat in each place, but he finally come out a-shinin', an' lookin' like thin smoke."

"What's this?" said the doctor, bewildered-like.

"I think it's London fog; I lived thar when I was a boy," splained the patient.

"Praise Providence!" sez the doctor, "we must be gittin' nigh the surface. B'ile him ag'in!"

"He sighed as he spoke, bein' about tired out, fur they had been at work over the chap sence breakfast, an' the sun was jest goin' down. The last b'ilin' did the business, though, an' the patient come out white an' pooty as a baby, but the dirt they had washed off him clogged up the springs so that they had ter cart it away. Thar was a canyon nigh the town they had wanted ter bridge over, but they couldn't raise money enough; but it's a sober fack that when the earth they had b'iled off the patient was dumped in thar, it filled the canyon ter the top an' no bridge was needed!"

"A true story, no doubt," observed Gault.

"Doctor Todd ought to hire you as an advertising agent. When we have caught Philip Templeton and his daughter, I'll recommend you, if you help us faithfully."

Yank Yellowbird turned suddenly in his saddle.

"Da'rter! Did you say da'rter?"

"That's what I said."

"So yer runaway convict is 'compained by his da'rter?"

"Certainly."

"How old is he?"

"Sixty years, possibly."

At this moment Chickering addressed Gault, and their conversation was directed to other matters. The tall guide, however, did not hear what they were saying; he had relapsed into deep thought.

"An old man," he was thinking, "an' his da'rter! Yank Yellowbird, this ain't no fit work fur you. The critter may be an escaped convict, an' all that sort o' thing, but he's old, an' he's got a da'rter along! Ef I'd knowed this I'd never agreed ter guide these man-hunters ter Big Medicine; I ain't no woman-hunter, by hurley! What'll I do? Ef I go thar, an' see her triberlations an' distresses, it'll on fit me fur work fur a month arterward. I won't go!"

He stopped his horse suddenly.

"What now?" Gault demanded. "Is it Indians?"

"Mister, it's wu'ss!" said Yank, in a melancholy voice.

"White outlaws?"

"No; it's newrol'gy."

"Neuralgia! What do you mean?"

"I've got it, an' not that, either—it's me! got Land o' Goshen! how the pains shoot through me!"

"This is sudden," said Gault.

"Awful sudden!" Yank coincided.

"You'll soon be better."

"I don't think it," mournfully replied the guide; "I hev a presentiment that it'll be fatal. Mister, take yer army an' go on. I'll lay down hyar, an' ef the egregious newrol'gy kerries me off, an' ye find my remains hyar on yer return, jest put up a headstun' fur me, will ye?"

"Nonsense! Such a brawny man as you

ought not to lament over neuralgia. It's only a little pain in the head."

The guide had dismounted, lain down on the ground and doubled himself up. He now sent up a mournful groan.

"In the head!" he repeated. "Mister, I reckon you ain't 'quainted with the sort o' newrol'gy I hev. It's all over me, an' it's wu'ss than a prairie fire. It's a Lightnin' Express, an' a telegram system. It's in ev'ry j'int, an' my bones are tyin' up inter knots. It's liable ter snap my legs outer their sockets, an' pull my clothes right off my back!"

He twisted and squirmed on the ground as he spoke, and uttered a few more dismal groans.

"Come! this is absurd," exclaimed Gault.

"What do you mean?"

"Mister, I can't go on, nohow. I'm in the hospital, so ter speak, an' may stay hyar a week. You'll hev ter go on 'thout me."

"Go on!"

"To be sure."

"But we don't know the way."

"Can't you see the trail?"

"Yes, but it may branch—"

"It don't branch."

"Man, I don't believe you're in pain at all."

The detective looked suspiciously at Yank as he spoke.

"You don't, do ye? Mister, ef I rekyver from this distemper, I'll see ye about that later, jest as like as not."

"If you are really in trouble, it is our duty to stand by you. Come, what is it?"

"It's the newrol'gy, I tell ye, an' it's o' a malev'lent species—it's ketchin', an' I've gi'n it ter lots o' folks, an' it's sure death; nobody that ever had it ever lived two days. The best thing you kin do is ter run like all possess't. Face toward Big Medicine, an' lick yer hosses inter a run!"

At the last words the guide was taken with a fresh paroxysm, and his heels and arms flew about in a most surprising manner.

Gault looked at his companions in uncertainty.

"It is my opinion," said Chickering, "that this fellow is a humbug. He has received his pay for guiding us, and now wants to back out. Let him go, say I. We need no guide, anyhow; this trail is as plain as an Eastern road. We can't delay here, or we shall never capture the convict. This fellow's freak is a Western eccentricity, I take it; he is not deserving of any time or attention. I say, ride on!"

Gault looked at the third officer.

"And you, Wing?"

"I, too, say ride on."

"Then we will go."

Gault redirected his gaze toward Yellowbird.

"Come, my man, will you go with us?"

"Can't do it, nohow," the guide lugubriously replied. "The newrol'gy is snappin' my j'int 'round so that it might jerk me right off my hoss. On one 'casion it lifted me up inter a tree-top two hundred feet high, an' I had an egregious time gettin' down. I won't go on, thankee; I'll stay hyar an' hang onter the grass, so the newrol'gy won't lift me. Don't mind me; I've had a good many fatal attacks, but I always rekyver."

"It is clear to me that you are a fraud, and we will waste no more time with you," said Gault, angrily. "You deserve punishment, but we will let you go. Come, men!"

He started his horse with a savage jerk at the rein, and, followed by his fellow-officers, rode away. The timber soon concealed them from view.

When they were fairly gone Yank Yellowbird's pains seemed to abate; he looked after them cautiously, a smile appeared on his bronzed face, and he arose without trouble.

"You kin hunt old men an' their darters all ye want ter," he observed, "but I ain't no sech atrocious insex; not much, I ain't! Can't go ag'in' a woman, nohow. Come, Remorse; we'll travel t'other way. We ain't no woman prosecutors—not ter my knowledge."

The last words were addressed to his horse. He swung himself into the saddle, and with a quiet smile on his face, rode away in a d'rection at right angles with that taken by the convict-hunters.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE WAY OF AN OLD FRIEND.

OTHER riders had passed along the trail that day before Abel Gault and his fellow-officers.

They were two in number, and, though strangers in the vicinity, had no guide, though one was a man well advanced in years, and the other a young girl who looked out of place in that wild, Western land.

Both had a weary, harassed look, as though they had reason to fear some impending danger, and had overtaxed their strength to avoid it.

They were persons to attract more than passing notice. The man had a fine, upright figure; his smoothly-shaven face was full of intelligence and power; and his short, snow-white hair gave him an aristocratic look.

His companion had probably seen twenty-two years of life, and was strikingly pretty, if not strictly beautiful. She was a pronounced brunette, having rippling, jet-black hair, dark



eyes and full-colored cheeks. She was of medium height, and her fine figure was so well filled out that every point was a study fit for an artist.

The fall of night found them still on the trail.

"No sign of the town, yet!" sighed the girl.

"Do not be discouraged, Vivian," encouragingly replied the old gentleman. "It can be but a short distance away now. Are you very weary?"

"A little, but my courage is good."

"It is always good; it is wonderful. Well is it for hunted Philip Templeton that the light of your presence is thrown upon his darkened life?"

"Ah! but I hope a brighter sun is rising for you; I trust that peace, rest and safety are ahead of you."

"You forget the human bloodhounds on my track."

"I do not forget Nelson Langleigh; he will surely protect, secrete you."

"I wish I was sure of Langleigh. How will he receive me? True, he owes everything to me, but men are not always grateful. How will he receive me?"

"Surely, as friend should receive friend."

Vivian spoke cheerfully, but there was a shadow on Philip Templeton's face which did not vanish; he was older and wiser than she, and knew more of the ways of the world and mankind.

"Langleigh is said to be a great man at Medicine Springs," he added, after a pause.

"If we can evade the detectives, maybe you can stay at the Springs and get the benefit of their medicinal powers," suggested Vivian. "You know it is said to be a great health resort."

"Yes."

"Big Medicine, some folks call it, and they say its waters will cure all ills."

"It is just like Langleigh to be in such a place. He was always enterprising, if not practical; always full of unusual schemes and ways of raising money. And they say he is growing rich at Medicine Springs, owning about all the town. It's not medicinal water that I need, however; it is rest, peace, freedom from danger."

"Poor father!" murmured the girl, tenderly.

"The horror of the last year has totally unnerved me; it has been a terrible experience for an honest man. How swiftly events have come—my arrest for a crime of which I was innocent; the trial and conviction; the long term in prison; the conflagration and the escape; and the subsequent flight. It would be almost impossible for me to realize it; it would be like a terrible dream were not the detectives now on my track, hounding me from place to place. It is real—terribly real. I am a hunted convict!"

His voice trembled as he spoke; there was deep pathos in every tone.

Vivian looked at him with tender pity, but, before she could reply, they passed a grove of trees, which was thick with underbrush, and a score or more of lights were seen a hundred yards away, glittering like huge fire-flies.

"Medicine Springs!" exclaimed Templeton.

"And our journey's end."

"Yes. Urge your horse; I am impatient to see how all this will end."

The jaded steeds were made to quicken their pace, and the town was speedily reached. They were strangers, but an especially strong center of lights drew them to a large building upon which swung a sign announcing that it was a hotel.

Nothing could have been more timely, and they sought admission.

The place seemed conducted on systematic principles, and they were as promptly served as though they had been in a less wild region.

When Templeton had seen a comfortable room assigned to Vivian, and supper ordered, he inquired after the way to Nelson Langleigh's residence.

In such a crisis, he could not afford to lose a moment. He was given due directions.

Mr. Cecil Montclair, proprietor of the hotel, looked wonderingly after the departing stranger, and then back to his clerk.

"The old gent must have important business with Langleigh," he observed.

"I should say so, if he can't wait for supper," the employee replied.

"Did you notice his daughter?"

"No."

"She was as charming a damsel as I ever saw, be Jove!"

"Chance for you, sir."

"Don't know," said Montclair, stroking his blonde mustache; "I don't marry any girl without references, don't ye know!"

In the meanwhile, Mr. Templeton was hurrying along the street. He soon reached Langleigh's house, rung the bell, stated to the servant who appeared that he wished to see the owner of the house, and was conducted to the parlor.

This room was remarkably well furnished for a house in such a new, wild place as Medicine Springs, but Mr. Langleigh was getting rich out of the alleged medicinal waters—for he controlled all the springs which gave the town its

name, and had an elaborate bathing establishment there—and he liked luxurious things.

Templeton scarcely noticed his surroundings, but nervously awaited Langleigh's coming.

Steps sounded outside the door, the latter was opened, and a man entered.

This was Nelson Langleigh; a man of upward of fifty years, but one who bore his years well. His hair and mustache showed no gray threads, and his frame, though very spare of flesh, seemed hardy. His face, smoothly shaven except at the upper lip, was one of that kind that is never white, even after fresh contact with a razor. Its dark, bluish tinge around the jaws was in keeping with his generally dark complexion, but did not improve his looks.

Withal, this face was cold, grim and severe, and he might have been a fanatic of the days when alleged witches were hung, so far as appearance went.

He looked stolidly at Templeton, who had arisen.

"Mr. Langleigh," said the visitor, in an unsteady voice, "don't you know me?"

"I can't say that I do," replied the great man of Medicine Springs, speaking slowly, and enunciating each word with laborious distinctness.

"I am Philip Templeton!"

Langleigh started back; the severe composure of his face vanished, and he actually looked startled. He stared blankly, silently at the speaker.

"You know me now?"

"Yes."

Templeton's heart sunk. This was not the kind of reception he had a right to expect from a man he had helped out of difficulties which would otherwise have overwhelmed him. He felt that his worst fears were realized; Langleigh was sorry, perhaps angry that he had come.

Could he hope for anything from this severe-faced man?

"Why are you here?" abruptly demanded Langleigh.

"I have come to ask your aid."

Langleigh's eyes traveled up and down the visitor's person in a way which was an insult in itself.

"I do not want money," hastily added Templeton, interpreting the glance; "I have enough of that. What I desire is protection, sir. I helped you in the past when you were in need; now I am sorely beset with troubles. I am pursued by enemies, and am a stranger here. This is your home; I ask your protection—your aid to throw my pursuers from the track!"

He spoke with vehement eloquence, and stretched out his hands toward his old acquaintance, mechanically adding to his plea.

"Who are these pursuers?" coldly asked Langleigh.

The visitor hesitated.

"When last I heard from you, you had gone to prison for five years. Not much over one year has elapsed. Can it be that your pursuers are officers?"

"They are," Templeton confessed, agitatedly, "and I am an escaped convict. These are plain, terrible facts; but I swear to you that I am an innocent man; I never committed the crime for which I was so unjustly sentenced."

"And now you are fleeing from officers?"

"Yes, but—"

"In that case you can hardly expect me to aid you. The law is something I don't care to oppose."

"But I helped you in former days—"

"We were both young and foolish then. Age has given me wisdom, and I decline to fight against the law for any one."

Cold and severe was his voice, and his eyes had a pitiless light, but Philip Templeton broke forth vehemently:

"Wait, wait! Hear me out! I am not alone in my flight; my daughter, Vivian, bears me company. For her sake, have pity! I am the only friend of my poor, motherless child, and she will be left alone in this wild land. It will break her heart to see me recaptured. For her sake, have pity!"

"If the girl is sharing your flight, she is a fool, that's all I've got to say," harshly answered Langleigh.

"Great heavens! has your heart turned to stone?" wildly demanded Templeton.

"It has grown wise—or my brain has. My motto is, each man for himself!"

"Nelson Langleigh, have you forgotten what I once did for you?"

"No."

"Have you not gratitude for that?"

"Not enough to put my head into the lion's jaws. You are an escaped convict; I am a respectable man, esteemed by the whole world, and an example of what uprightness will do for one who practices it. Am I to stoop from my honorable position to brush against the mud of your life?"

These words, spoken in Langleigh's peculiar, cold, deliberate way, seemed to fall like lumps of ice from his lips; they were frigid and pitiless in the extreme.

Templeton's face had grown paler, but there was that in his expression which told of resolution born of desperation.

Suddenly the door-bell rung again.

The escaped convict started; he suspected what it meant. His gaze wandered, then flashed back to Langleigh. The same idea was in both men's minds, and not a word was spoken for a full minute. Then came a servant with the announcement:

"Mr. Detective Gault and three other officers to see Mr. Langleigh, sir!"

"Show them into this room, at once—"

Thus far had Langleigh spoken, but with a few rapid strides Templeton reached his side; his arm was seized in a painful grasp, and the convict hoarsely whispered in his ear:

"Withdraw that order, Nelson Langleigh, or it will be the worse for you. Save me from the bloodhounds of law, or, by heaven, we go to ruin together!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### A FORCED ALLIANCE.

LANGLEIGH flashed a righteously-indignant glance at the desperate convict.

"Unhand me, fellow!" he cried. "How dare you threaten me? It is high time you were again made prisoner. Abram, send in the—"

"Stop!" ordered Templeton, in the same hoarse voice. "Beware what you do! I do not threaten you with violence, but if you try to betray me my lips shall speak a secret that you think buried in the past; I will tell the world how Granite Tower was burned!"

Nelson Langleigh recoiled. The words, which seemed so blind to others, were evidently plain to him, and consternation was pictured on his dark face.

"Do you think," Templeton intensely added, "that if the world knew this you would hold your head so high? I can prove all if I try—now, sir, call the officers if you will!"

Philip Templeton folded his arms and towered boldly over his companion. Their positions had suddenly been reversed; he was the accuser, and Langleigh was the one who seemed crushed by misfortune.

The face of the great man of Medicine Springs was a study. Fear, hatred and dismay were expressed there, and when he tried to speak no words passed his trembling lips. Suddenly he remembered the staring servant, and turned to him angrily.

"Go to the hall," he ordered, "and await my orders there. Speak to no one until I give you leave."

Abram bowed and withdrew.

Langleigh turned to his visitor again.

"Did I understand you to say—"

"You understood me to say that I knew how Granite Tower was burned, why it was done, and who was the cause of it. I had hoped that you would not force me to say this; I had relied on your gratitude rather than your fears, but you have forced me to speak plainly. The officers are in yonder room; call them if you will!"

Fearlessly the convict faced the master of the house. He was playing a bold game, and its very desperation roused the strength of his nature and enabled him to cast off the old weakness.

"Of course I won't call them," muttered Langleigh.

"As you will."

"What do you want me to do, Templeton?"

"Shall we help each other?"

"Yes," Langleigh answered, but his manner was sullen.

"Then send Abel Gault and his fellow-officers away."

"I will do so at once."

"Wait! They probably feel sure that I am in this village; you must do more than tell them you have not seen me."

"What more can I do?"

"Put them on a false scent. Tell them I passed through here three hours ago, and rode on at full speed toward the next town. Get rid of them thus, and then—"

Templeton paused and surveyed his companion for a moment in silence. He had intended to ask Nelson Langleigh to secrete him, but he now knew that such aid from him would be no aid, and would result in his being betrayed sooner or later.

"And then I will care for myself," he added.

Langleigh's gaze was bent upon the floor, and a tumult of emotions went rushing through his mind. He felt that he must yield, but it was hard after so long being a practical king at Medicine Springs; and above all, it was hard to yield to Templeton.

He hated this man all the more because he ought to have felt gratitude to him; his mind was a purgatory of vengeful, bitter thoughts. Gladly would he have given his visitor over to the officers, but—he dared not!

The secret words spoken by Templeton had a meaning he was too wise to defy.

"I have the idea," he finally said, as his gaze was lifted to Templeton's face.

"Well?"

"I'll send for our sheriff, Mr. Bunker, and it shall be his duty to give the officers the deceptive message you mentioned. He will obey me, and I will send them on the false scent."

Templeton looked at him keenly.



"Are you sincere?"

"I am; I swear it."

"Then proceed."

Langleigh went to a table, and hurriedly wrote a brief note. He showed it to Templeton; it was approved of; and then he called Abram and directed him to make all possible haste and take it to Sheriff Bunker.

"Now," continued the master of the house, as Abram hurried away, "I will go to the officers and quiet them. You can rely upon me to set them adrift."

Templeton was inclined to believe this, for Langleigh's manner was sullen, like that of one forced to do what is against his will. Had he intended treachery, he would have simulated zeal and friendship.

"Very well," the fugitive replied.

Langleigh went out, and when once beyond Templeton's sight, his face grew darker than ever with passion.

"Curses on the scoundrel!" he hissed, "am I to be defied in my own house? I could place a noose around his neck with my own hands—but, no, no; this will not do. He mentioned Granite Tower; I am in his power, and for the time, must aid him as though my heart was in the work. I dare not let these men capture him!"

He entered the room where the other visitors had been left. They were the same trio we have seen on the Medicine Springs trail with Yank Yellowbird. Abel Gault promptly arose.

"Good-evening, sir. This is Mr. Langleigh, I suppose."

"That is my name."

"I am named Gault, and am a detective from the East. These are my fellow-officers. We are on the track of one Philip Templeton, an escaped convict. Believing that he may be in Medicine Springs, and knowing you to be the leading man of the town, we have sought your aid in the matter."

"Really, sir," Langleigh politely answered, "ours is such a transient, cosmopolitan population, and Western men are so given to sailing under assumed names, that I fear I cannot help you so much as your own eyes."

"But this convict, if here, has not been in town over five hours."

"That changes the aspect of affairs. By the way, if you are not in haste, I think I can soon aid you. I am expecting our sheriff, Mr. Bunker, every moment, and as he is a man who always keeps his eyes open, he can probably locate your runaway at once."

"Thanks. By the way, Templeton's daughter is with him."

"A female convict?"

"No; but she shares his flight."

"Well, you can have them both. We don't want them."

"Another question, if you please. During a part of our journey we had for our guide a loquacious, lying knave who finally deserted us. His name was Yank Yellowbird. Did you ever hear of him?"

"I think so; don't they call him the Hustler from Hardscrabble?"

"I can't say as to that. He ought to be named the Liar from Hardscrabble. But let him go. We are anxious to get Templeton, who is a forger, and escaped from prison during a fire therein."

Just then the door-bell rung.

"Sheriff Bunker, I think," said Langleigh.

"Excuse me for a moment, please."

He went out and was gone a few minutes; then he returned, accompanied by a big, rough-looking man, whom he introduced as Sheriff Bunker. Such was the man's name and position, but candor compels the admission that he looked more like a prize-fighter, or law-breaker, than he did like an officer.

"I've told Mr. Bunker about your errand," added Langleigh.

"Yes," added the sheriff, "an' it's posserble I've seen the parties in question. Ef you'll describe 'em, I kin tell."

Gault gave a clear description of Templeton and his daughter.

"Jes' so," said Bunker; "thought it must be them. Wal, gents, I opine that you'll find 'em at Red Arrow."

"At Red Arrow?"

"Yes; next town beyond; ten mild off. I seen an old man an' gal go skurryin' past Big Medicine three or four hours ago, an' thought at the time that they seemed in an uncommon hurry. Now you've told how they look, I'll swear it was yer runaways."

"They went north, did they?" asked Langleigh.

"Yes."

"Then they have undoubtedly gone to Red Arrow."

This deception was so well conducted, that Abel Gault did not suspect that he was being made a victim.

"Then we'll go at once to Red Arrow!" he declared.

"What! to-night?" asked Langleigh.

"Yes. That is, if we can get fresh horses. Ours are too much beaten out for further traveling."

Montclair, of the Hygeia Hotel, can undoubtedly supply you. Sheriff, perhaps you

can help the gentlemen by seeing Montclair for them."

"I will do so, willin'ly," Bunker answered.

Gault arose, and, after thanking Langleigh, went out with his fellow-officers and Bunker. When they were gone, the master of the house began to pace the floor excitedly. The usual cold composure of his nature was not proof against the danger which menaced him; he who had been a power at Medicine Springs was not only shaking on his throne, but could be ruined by a few words from Templeton's lips.

He had secretly directed Bunker to return to him, but the minutes of his absence seemed interminably long. Templeton was left alone—would he quietly submit to this delay?

Bunker returned, at last, and Langleigh faced him eagerly.

"Well?" he questioned.

"They've gone on; I got 'em the hosses, an' they hev gone toward Red Arrow in hot haste. Much good may it do them!"

"Bunker, do you know who the man is whom we have saved?"

"You called him Templeton."

"That told his name, but did not tell what he knows about us. You will be dumfounded when you know all. Templeton was once my friend—at least, he was useful to me—but I hate him, and would have delivered him over to the officers, had he not whispered that to me which was like a clap of thunder. He told me that if I did not save him he would tell the whole world how Granite Tower was burned!"

Bunker recoiled; his eyes had a wild, startled look.

"What?" he cried, sharply.

"It is true; he made the threat plainly, and you know what that means to us. If the world ever knows the Mainwaring case, we don't get clear with less than imprisonment for life. Think of that, Bob Bunker!"

"An' Templeton knows this?"

"Yes."

"Then," exclaimed the big sheriff, clinching his hand nervously, "he's ez good ez dead. I don't let no man go lopin' round who kin tell sech things on me."

Langleigh grasped the speaker's hand.

"That's horse sense," he declared. "I thought you would be with me. While Templeton lives we are not safe."

"He must die!"

"He shall die; but how?"

"Give me charge on't. We'll gobble him at once; I'll take him ter the mountains; an' when ter-morrer dawns thar won't be no more danger fur us."

"Good! Shall we strike at once?"

"Yes, o' course. Lead the way ter this varmint who knows so much; I'll settle his case in short order."

So saying, Sheriff Bunker drew a long-bladed knife, and grimly felt of its edge.

"This fur him when I git him ter the mountains!" he added.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### GRIFFIN'S WELL.

PHILIP TEMPLETON had grown impatient and nervous when the door opened and Langleigh and Bunker entered. Their coming did not serve to reassure him. There was something in the manner of both men which filled him with new apprehensions.

He gazed at them in uncertainty.

"They're gone," said Langleigh, abruptly, referring to Gault and the other officers.

"On a false scent?" asked Templeton, slowly.

"Yes."

The convict felt that he ought to utter thanks, but the glances bent upon him by the two men seemed to palsy his tongue; he could not yet believe that he had reason to thank them.

"Now I'll settle my business with you," Langleigh added, in a hard, significant voice.

"Yes," supplemented Bob Bunker, "an' in this way!"

With a quick movement he drew a revolver and leveled it at the unfortunate gentleman.

"Surrender, ye sneak!" he continued. "Put up yer hands! You're my pris'n'r an' ef ye try any games I'll drop ye jest whar ye be!"

Templeton flashed a quick glance at Langleigh.

"What does this mean?" he tremulously asked.

"It means," coldly, deliberately replied the master of the house, "that you can't come here and act the bravo. You have threatened me, and this is the result. I don't think you'll tell how Granite Tower was burned!"

"Why should I tell, now that you have sent Gault away?"

"No doubt you would like to tell, but—"

"But he won't!" interrupted Bunker. "Come, boss, this ain't no time fur delay; the sooner this biz is over, the better. You keep him kivered with the six-shooters, while I muzzle the critter."

He advanced, holding a pair of handcuffs he had taken from his pocket, but Templeton retreated a step and cried in a clear voice:

"Keep back! I will not submit!"

He was interrupted. Bunker made a sudden

rush and seized him. After that it was soon over; the delicately-built old man was no match for the burly, middle-aged sheriff, and he was soon ironed. When it was done he stood very still and looked at his chief enemy.

"Nelson Langleigh," he said, in a deep voice, "I hope you are not contemplating an act which will tell against you in the end."

Not a word answered Langleigh.

"Remember," continued Templeton, "that my daughter is at the hotel. For the sake of that helpless girl, have mercy upon me!"

"Bunker, take him away!" ordered Langleigh, irritably, and then he turned and hurried from the room.

He had already given his brutal follower full directions, and did not fear that he would fail to obey them.

Bunker laid his hand heavily on Templeton's shoulder.

"Come, critter!" he directed, roughly.

"Sir," replied Templeton, earnestly, "I cannot believe that your heart is one of stone, and I beseech you to think what you are doing. I am not sure but my own life is worthless, but my child will be left alone in the world, and in a strange, wild country, if you do harm to me. For her sake let me go free, and I will at once leave Medicine Springs forever."

"You're a stubborn gallows-bird, ain't ye? Want ter corrupt my o'ficial integrity, don't ye? Wal, you can't do it, fur Bob Bunker ain't the chap ter sell his mess o' potterage fur nothin'. Not much. Come with me!"

"Where?"

"Whar I see fit ter take ye, by thunder! Now, come along, an' don't make no more talks."

Tightening his hold upon his prisoner, he dragged, rather than led, him from the room and to the outer door. He opened this, and they passed from the house; and then the sheriff led the way to a spot back of the village, where they came upon two other men at the base of a large rock.

"So you're hyar, lads? I was afeard ye might be behind time. Now take this party, an' don't ye let him git away; I'll hold ye a'countable fur him, mind."

"Don't ye worry; we'll hang ter him like death."

"He'll prob'ly plead with ye, an' offer ye money ter let him loose."

"Twon't do a bit o' good, boss. We'll hang ter him even ef an' earthquake comes along ter help him."

"Good! Now I'm off, but I'll be back soon. Use yer brains wal while I'm gone."

Bunker stalked away, returned to the village, and sought Montclair's hotel. He was soon alone with that individual, who was evidently expecting him.

"How does it go, my bold warrior?"

"All correct," the sheriff answered. "We hev got the old chap away, an' it only remains ter take the gal."

"Bob, I hate to let her go," said Montclair.

"Why so?"

"First, it does seem a little bit rocky to use a woman so; nextly, she's devilish pretty, and I'd like to make some such piece of femininity Mrs. Cecil Montclair."

"You know Langleigh's orders."

"Yes, and I suppose it must be so, but I wash my hands of the job. I can buckle onto a man, and cut my bigness, but when it comes to massacring a woman—Bob, it's a little too much for my nerves."

The sheriff smiled grimly; he knew that if Vivian Templeton had not been a pretty girl, she could never have aroused Montclair's pity. In his elegant way the hotel-keeper was without mercy.

"I'll take all the blame onter my shoulders," replied Bunker. "Jest waltz along the gal, an' I'll take her away an' give ye a chance ter smooth down the feathers o' yer conscience."

"She is all ready, if she *must* go. The old woman gave her the drug, and then bound her hands. You will have no trouble. As for the horses, they are ready, too."

"Then I'll be off at once."

Ten minutes later three horses left the rear of the hotel. One was riderless, and was led by a man who rode a second animal, while on the third went Bob Bunker, with Vivian in his arms. She was in a drugged slumber, and unconscious of all around her.

This is what Philip Templeton saw when they joined him, and he felt that the waters of desolation were rolling over him. He had appealed, but in vain, to his guards, and now he knew that unless some act of Providence thwarted the evil party, hope had forever departed.

What was the object of this night journey he did not know, but he could place no promising construction upon it. Langleigh had been greatly alarmed when he spoke of Granite Tower, and had obeyed him because he had great reason to fear the consequences of an exposure.

Such being the case, was it likely that he would proceed so harshly against the man who held the secret *unless he intended to silence him forever?*

Templeton shivered at the thought, and, as



they rode away from Medicine Springs, looked at Vivian with eyes which seemed to ache with unshed tears.

For himself he did not care so much; ever since the shadow of unjust accusation fell upon him, he had felt that his life was a ruin; but thoughts of Vivian brought to his heart the keenest pangs of his whole life.

"Heaven have mercy upon her!" thought the unhappy father, "and may He who is more powerful than any earthly parent shield her from harm."

The mute prayer went up from his heart, but like many another person who has prayed in the depth of his woe, he felt little faith that it would be answered; he could see only misery and suffering in store for her.

The party rode northeast, and, shortly after leaving the village, struck rough country—the foothills of the higher ridge away to the east. That they had some definite destination was clear, for, riding in silence, they pressed on as rapidly as the nature of the ground would admit.

Bunker rode at the head, still carrying the unconscious girl, then came Templeton, riding between two of the minor captors; and the remaining man brought up the rear.

These subordinates Templeton had heard called by name, and he marked them indelibly on the tablets of his memory.

They were Abe Rooks, Turk Tobin and Lot Piper.

When they had reached a point five miles from Medicine Springs, the sheriff called Tobin to his side and spoke in a voice inaudible to Templeton.

"Turk, hev you the narve ter 'do' fer the gal?"

"I hev, sheriff," was the ready reply.

"Then I'll let you an' Lot hev that part, an' Abe an' me will do for the old man. We'll halt a bit further on; you take her an' go a hundred yards away, an' then—finish the work!"

Bunker spoke a little nervously; villain that he was, the enormity of their crime affected him considerably.

"All right," Tobin cheerfully answered.

Vivian was passed to the minor villain's arms. Templeton saw the change with increased apprehension, but he had tried every argument which his tongue could frame, and words seemed now to have deserted him. He was in despair, and it was as though a mountain of ice rested upon his heart. He lifted his eyes heavenward, as though to breathe another prayer for his loved one, and the stars seemed to look down upon him with a pitiless glare and mock his misery.

Suddenly Tobin and Piper started their horses into a more rapid pace, and with Vivian still in the former's arms, dashed away.

Templeton started and looked at Bunker, but the latter laid his hand on the rein of the prisoner's horse.

"We stop here!" he said, with grim significance.

Tobin and Piper did not look back, and for a while they rode in silence. Then the latter spoke:

"Turk, this job is a bit rough."

"Why so?"

"I ain't thin-skinned, but when it comes ter killin' a woman, 'tain't pleasant."

"I'll be shot ef you ain't right, Lot!"

"You'll hev ter do the work; I won't!"

Tobin did not answer at once.

"I've been thinkin'," he finally said, "that we may git out o' this. Bunker had no business ter give us the heavy eend o' the load. I reckon I'm ez bad ez most men, but I don't hanker fur this job. You know whar Griffin's Well is, don't ye?"

"Of course."

"Wal, how'd it do fur us ter lower the gal in thar alive, an' leave her? She never could git out, an' wouldn't live long, an' we wouldn't hev her blood on our hands."

"The very identikel thing, by thunder!" Piper agreed. "You hev got a head on yer shoulders, Turk, an' we never 'll lose anything by showin' mercy ter the gal."

Mercy! That was what he called it, but their proposed device was a scheme which had little mercy in it. "Griffin's Well" was a deep, natural hole in the rocks, of a form which had suggested one portion of its name, where a miner named Griffin had once been imprisoned by the perpendicular walls after accidentally falling in. Strong man that he was, he had been utterly unable to get out, and would have starved there only that help came just in time.

As an act of "mercy," Tobin and Piper intended to leave Vivian there, in order that, by their peculiar system of logic, they would be free from the crime of harming her.

A revolver-shot sounded behind them.

"Bunker has settled his victim," said Tobin, with a start. "Hurry up, man, an' let us git our work done, too!"

"Why didn't Bunker use his revolver on both on 'em, if he wanted the woman settled, too?" grumbled Piper.

"He allowed it would be mean ter hev the old gent see it done. I s'pose Bunker would rave at us ef he knowed we was disobeyin' his orders."

"It'll never be knowed, onless somebody happens 'long hyar an' finds the remains."

"We kin come 'round in a month or so ourselves, an' remove all traces."

"That's the idee; now you hev it. By follerin' this plan we'll make it all safe. But hyar we be at the Well!"

It was a wild place, with rocks of all sizes and shapes scattered around, and the series of ridges stretching back toward the highest point of the hills in terrace form; and in the midst of all, so well hidden that a stranger might pass unsuspectingly by within twenty feet of it, was Griffin's Well.

There was little to be seen at night except a black spot between walls of rock, but these men knew the place well. They dismounted; tied their lassoes together; secured one end to the waist of the still unconscious girl, and began to lower her into the pit.

For a moment her pale face was dimly visible; then the black cavity hid it from view. Systematically they let the lasso slip; the invisible burden sunk lower; and then a sudden cessation of the strain on their arms told that it had reached the bottom.

The lassoes could not be recovered, so the loose end was flung down after the helpless girl.

"Thar," said Tobin, in a voice of deep satisfaction, "she won't git out o' thar."

"I reckon not. Griffin couldn't, an' he was a mighty muscular chap, ez wal ez a good climber. Yas, the gal is ez good ez buried, an' our consciences is clear."

"Jes' so; an' I'm glad it's so; I never did like ter harm a woman. Starvation is an easy way ter go off, when ye git used ter it."

So saying, the ruffians remounted and rode back to join Bunker.

## CHAPTER V.

### COMPANIONS ON THE TRAIL.

Two weeks later than the events before recorded.

Three horsemen were advancing along the trail toward Medicine Springs. One of these was the eccentric individual who had been guide for the three detectives until he was attacked by his painful malady, as asserted by himself, and forced to stop by the way.

The second man, he who rode by his side, was probably not much less than thirty years; a tall, strongly-built man with limbs fit for a gladiator, and a large, well-formed head, which was unconsciously held very erect, almost haughtily, an observer might think.

His face was bronzed and rather somber, while over all was that something, hard to describe but very evident to the practiced eye, which told of unusual intelligence and a strong, resolute mind. He looked like a borderman of considerable experience, but seemed created for a life among books and society, rather than the Wild West.

Despite this, he professed a cynical disregard of society and its followers, when he referred to the subject at all, and extolled the free life of prairie and wilderness.

The third man rode in the rear of the other two. He was an Indian who did not look over twenty years of age. He was slenderly, but muscularly built, while his face was more symmetrical than is usual with his people. His most prominent characteristic, however, was to be found in his eyes. "Keeness" hardly describes them, for they were strangely piercing and wild, though as strangely handsome.

The younger of the white men had fallen in with his present companions on the trail, and they had both traveled together, but no confidences had been exchanged beyond the matter of names. Ben Buckingham, the young man had called himself, and in return he had learned that the veteran was named Yank Yellowbird—or so he stated.

The Indian was of the Modoc tribe, and was known as Trail-Lifter. Yank, however, often called him "Still Tongue," and explained the fact by saying that he was a mute.

Such was not the case with Yank; he could talk volubly, and did so as they went along. He grew curious, too, in regard to Buckingham, and finally determined to satisfy that yearning.

"Ef I ain't infringin' on delicacy," he observed, "may I ax as ter why you're goin' ter Big Medicine?"

"Merely to see the place," Buckingham answered. "I am an aimless wanderer, and liable to appear anywhere."

"I've done considerable peramberlatin', myself," Yank returned, "an' the life sorter fits me. Some folks object, an' say a rollin' stone gathers no moss, but I don't know who in thunder wants ter be kivered over with moss, or any other egregious substance. I don't, by hurley!"

"A free life for me," asserted the younger man.

"To be sure. Wal, you'll find Big Medicine a good place ter observe things."

"A great health resort, I am told."

"I consait so."

This expression was frequently used by the mountaineer, and with somewhat indefinite meaning. That "consait" was an amended form of the word "conceit" was probable, but,

like his other favorite word, "egregious," he made it answer to uncounted meanings and uses.

"Yes," he added, "it must be a resort o' health, fur if it wa'n't, them patients never could b'ar up under the b'ilin's they're subject ter."

"I judge that you haven't much faith in the spring water, Mr. Yellowbird."

"Not much, I ain't; but I may be wrong. Ef so, I'm sorry, but I was born with prejudices, an' they will stick to me."

"One Nelson Langleigh runs the town, I believe."

"Big Medicine has three big men. Langleigh owns the place, or nigh all on't; Cecil Montclair keeps the hotel, boards the sick an' paralyzes them with bills; while Doctor Todd b'iles 'em, an' takes what's left o' their cash an' inheritance."

Ben Buckingham looked sharply at the guide.

"Do these men play into each other's hands?"

"Ef anything, I should say they played inter each other's pocketbooks."

"A better expression, perhaps. I don't suppose it would be safe to express such views t'ere?"

"When I hev views which want ter see the open air," placidly replied Yank, "they generally git loose. Ef the clique at Big Medicine is hum-buggin' folks, the patients seem ter like it, an' it ain't none o' my affair; but ef the idee struck me ter tell Nelson Langleigh my candid opinion o' his egregious b'ilin'-stablishment, I should prob'ly do it without regard ter his feelin's. I ain't no coward, with the exception o' my left foot, an' that is a weak sister. When thar's danger that foot always gits skeered, an' I hev the wu'st kind o' trouble ter keep it from runnin' away, while the rest on me is thrashin' the enemy like burley."

"You are singularly afflicted."

"Flicted! Mister, you don't begin ter know what 'flections I stagger under. I'm a victim o' newrol'gy in virulent an' chronicle form. Thar ain't a jint o' my whole system but what has been dislocated several time, while as fur the pain I suffer—why, I once had the ache photographed in St. Louis, ter present ter my descendants, ef I ever had any. I didn't get no comfort out on't, though, fur the photograffer made up a lot o' the pictures an' sold 'em as views o' the sun durin' an' eclipse."

"A remarkable ache that must have been," said Buckingham, smiling.

"To be sure. But hyar we be at our journey's eend. Now open yer eyes an' take a good look at Big Medicine."

The trio halted, and Ben Buckingham obeyed the last direction with due zeal.

Medicine Springs was not a large town, but it was young. It was not yet three years since the report went abroad that in Cutwater Gap were natural springs of water which possessed wonderful medicinal powers. Somehow, this story was widely spread, appearing even in Eastern newspapers; and then a village sprung up, almost as miraculously as Jack's bean-stalk, and the present "Big Medicine" was begun.

It was soon learned that Nelson Langleigh owned all of Cutwater Gap for a mile up and down the valley, and he showed such an inclination to get rich at the expense of new-comers that few would have come there had not Doctor Elnathan Todd declared that the springs unquestionably were wonderful as a healing agency.

Medicine Springs grew—and so did the worldly possessions of three men. They were Langleigh, Todd and Cecil Montclair, and it was noticeable that few other people could thrive there.

As for the invalids, they came in numbers. Some went away saying they were cured of their infirmities, others departed vowing that the alleged medicinal power of the water was a humbug.

All, however, went with the knowledge that they had left a good deal of money behind. Langleigh had erected a spacious "bath-house," so-called, to which all who would be cured had to go. This cost something. Doctor Todd, being the only man of medicine there, was their Esculapian adviser. This created additional expense. Montclair kept the only hotel, and all were obliged to stop there or "rough it" in dead earnest. And there was nothing modest about Montclair's bills.

There were various business places in the town, and private residences of people not ill. All these had the aid and friendship of Mr. Langleigh—unless they started in to give lodgings to invalids. If they did, it was noticed that there was a prompt disagreement between tenant and landlord—we have said that Langleigh owned the whole town—and the tenants moved away from the vicinity.

Ben Buckingham, looking on the scene for the first time, saw a narrow valley hemmed in by two rocky, well-wooded ridges. Near that at the north flowed a small river—the Serpent, so called. At the point where it disappeared from view it passed between two cliffs, where the ridges almost met.

Such was Cutwater Gap.

The village itself was noticeable only for the rather fine hotel, and the huge, but low, building erected over the springs by Langleigh.



"Does it strike ye forcibly?" asked Yank Yellowbird, after a pause, as he turned to Buckingham.

"It will do very well. I care nothing for empty show."

"Nor I, by hurley!" declared the mountaineer. "Give me simple things, plenty o' good air, water an' eatables, an' I don't keer fur glare an' glitter. The only thing I'm given ter bein' proud on is my pedigree."

"Your pedigree?"

"To be sure. Now I don't s'pose you'd suspect it, but I'm able ter trace my family back a right smart distance. My first forefather was named Adam, an' my first foremother was Eve. That much is sart'in, though all attempts ter trace the family back beyond them has resulted in melancholy failures. But, by the way, whar do ye mean ter put up while at Big Medicine?"

"I don't know."

"Goin' ter Montclair's hotel?"

"I haven't given the matter a thought."

A peculiar whistling sound from Trail-Lifter, the mute Modoc, caused Ben to look toward him. The young Indian, having called Yank's attention, was making rapid movements with his fingers which were wholly unintelligible to the rover.

Yank, however, smiled and turned to Buckingham.

"Still Tongue suggests that ye go inter a shanty with us, an' you're welcome ef ye care to do it. Speakin' o' the Injun, he's given ye a new name; Blacklock Ben, he calls ye, an' it fits well."

The mountaineer indicated Ben's black hair. The latter bowed to the Modoc with more attention than he would have given many a white man; unless he made an error of judgment, the red mute was a person of rather remarkable character.

"I am very much obliged to our friend, Trail-Lifter," he answered, "and unless events cause a change in my plans, I think I will accept your hospitality for a night. After that, I am more likely to strike out for myself."

The Indian's fingers flashed over and across each other for a few moments, and then Yank aided:

"Still Tongue asks me ter say ter yer that, ef you stay around Cutwater Gap, you'd better keep one eye open fur triberlations, an' distresses."

"Why so, mountaineer?"

"Life is onsartain, ye know."

"True, but what especial danger lurks around here?"

"Don't know, mister, by hurley; but thar are atrocious insex everywhere who delight in raisin' a rumpus. That's all. Shall we go on?"

"Yes."

They were about to start when a quick, sharp whistle passed Trail-Lifter's lips. Once more they turned toward him, Yank's movements being noticeably quick. One of the Modoc's hands was outstretched toward the right; their gaze followed the direction of his pointing finger, and a startling scene was revealed.

Two horses were sweeping across the plain at full speed, the first ridden by a young woman, and the second by a man; and it required only one glance to show that the former was a runaway.

It was an animal of immense size, and, just then, at least, its manner was vicious in the extreme. Its fair rider sat boldly in the saddle, and her grasp on the rein had not relaxed, but it was plain that she had no control whatever over its movements.

Only a few paces in the rear came the second horse, and it was equally clear that its rider was endeavoring to overtake and check the runaway, while everything indicated that he would ultimately succeed.

"Spread out!" exclaimed Yank Yellowbird. "Hyar is beauty in triberlation an' distress, an' it'll never do ter stand idle hyar. Spread out, an' ef the black hoss passes us all, he'll be a better man than we be, by hurley!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A CHOICE OF RESCUERS.

As the trio started to the aid of the imperiled damsel Ben Buckingham could not but notice her unwavering coolness; no wild Indian of the plains could have been more stoical in the face of danger than she.

There seemed little prospect of the trio being able to render any aid; the male rider was gaining rapidly on the runaway, and he bade fair to arrest its flight before it reached the other men.

But Buckingham now saw more.

Half-way between themselves and the riders stood a single man who had before been concealed by a thicket. This man had taken position with the evident intention of acting the rescuer, himself, if opportunity was given.

Ben smiled grimly. There was a slight vein of cynicism in his nature, and it impressed him as being somewhat laughable to see so many men eager to lend a hand in aid of beauty.

Another thing now impressed him. The fair rider was cool in the face of danger—very cool, indeed—and not one point of the scene escaped her active eyes. But—was it fancy, or did

Blacklock Ben see more? The idea occurred to him that though the black horse might have been a runaway at the beginning, it might now have been checked if its mistress had willed it.

Was it possible that the fair rider was playing a part, and intentionally giving the other rider a chance to "rescue" her?

As this idea occurred to the keen-eyed rover he saw one of the equestrienne's hands leave the rein and rise to her neck. At this point a white, fleecy worsted garment, worn for comfort or show—let us say, for comfort—was secured. Ben had before noticed it floating behind her shoulders as she rode.

Her hand remained raised only a few moments; then it quickly returned to the rein.

Suddenly the worsted garment slipped from her shoulders; it was caught by the wind and borne directly toward the other rider's horse, which now almost lapped her own in the race.

It fell directly over the horse's head, and with a snort that startled animal threw up its nose, partially reared, and then did what it had not had time to do before—shied sharply and completely broke.

Before its master could regain full control the black horse was several yards away, and then the man on foot, before mentioned, sprang forward and seized the runaway in a strong grasp.

It was over in a moment; the black horse yielded quite tamely; and then rescuer and rescued made a tableau, while the four men who had been unable to give any aid, advanced toward the spot.

"An excitin' ipisode," quoth Yank Yellowbird. "It reminds me o' the time when a frien' o' mine found another man tied ter the rails o' a steam-road. He couldn't ontie the egregious knots, an' as the ropes was about new he hated ter spile 'em by cuttin' 'em ter pieces, an' thar was the distress train rushin' onto them at the rate o' a hundred miles an hour. My frien' wa'n't a bit discouraged, but he stood right on the track an', when the distress train got thar, he seized the cow-ketcher by the horns an', layin' out his superfluous muskle, slung the hull train off the track. It killed up'ards o' forty passengers, but he not only saved the feller on the track, but took the rope an' sold it at the next town. Everybody praised his heroic work but one editor, an' my frien' thrashed him fur criticisin' his modest operandi, which is Chinook fur 'way o' doin' things.'"

By the time this incident was told Yank and his companions had reached the spot where the rescuer had assisted the young lady to alight.

Blacklock Ben saw that she was perfectly self-possessed, and was smiling graciously upon her rescuer. The rover glanced at the man who would have been her rescuer only for the worsted garment. He had gained control of his horse and now came riding up, but his face bore a perceptible scowl as he saw her smiling upon the more lucky man.

"I trust, Miss Langleigh, that you are not injured," he said, hastily.

"No, sir; thanks to Mr. Kirk, I am wholly uninjured," she sweetly replied.

The horseman shot an angry glance at the rescuer.

"Only that my horse was frightened by your flying wrap, I should have stopped your horse, myself."

"It was unfortunate that it blew from my shoulders at such a critical moment."

The fair speaker's voice was duly tinged with regret, but Ben Buckingham believed that he saw a sparkle in her eyes which indicated a want of sincerity. The astute rover noticed a marked difference in her manner toward the two men, and he believed then, as he had done before, that the worsted garment would not have blown away had she not deliberately untied it.

Buckingham formed a theory then and there. The baffled horseman was inclined to be a suitor for Miss Langleigh's hand; she did not like him in the least; and in the runaway she not only could have controlled her horse, herself, at the end, but she had deliberately thwarted the horseman and enabled him who was on foot to take place as her rescuer.

The latter—Mr. Kirk, she had called him—was a plain-looking but, clearly, intelligent young man, and Ben was favorably impressed by his appearance at once.

"A moment more," said the horseman, in a voice of deep regret, if not anger, "and I should have saved you."

"Some one else was at hand to save me, Mr. Montclair," the lady replied, as sweetly as ever.

Montclair flushed, and shot a threatening glance at the rescuer.

"He did no more than his duty, being your father's hired man, you know."

The sneer was apparent, and it was Miss Langleigh's turn to show increased color. There was an angry sparkle in her eyes, too, and she quickly retorted:

"I shall always approve of my father's having muscular employees, after this. How easily Mr. Kirk controlled Nero. I am afraid you could not have held him, Mr. Montclair."

Montclair's color deepened at this thrust, but Yank Yellowbird came to the rescue of all parties and poured oil on the troubled waters.

"Stoppin' hosses is quite an art," he observed,

"though thar is various ways o' doin' it. The wu'st way I know on is ter ketch hold o' the hoss's heels with yer stomach. The grip don't last long, an' it's apt ter give a feller a pain in his bread-basket. Young man, this job was a harn'some one, by hurley! You done wal; you done very wal; you done most mighty wal, sir."

Miss Langleigh gave the mountaineer a smile; she seemed to approve of what he said.

"My horse, Nero, is a vicious animal," she then remarked, "but I venture to say that he will not run away with me again. I shall subdue him!"

"May I ask the privilege of doing that?" quickly asked Montclair.

"Thank you, but no one can have that 'privilege,'" she as quickly replied. "I subdue my own horses, or they go unsubdued. What! be beaten by a horse? Never! Come here, Nero!"

The black horse advanced as obediently as though he had never been a rebel; then Miss Langleigh, graciously accepting the hand offered by Kirk when her intention became evident, quickly and gracefully regained her saddle.

"Good-day, gentlemen!" she said, quietly; then, with a word to Nero, she moved toward the village at a gallop.

Montclair had unclosed his lips to ask leave to accompany her, but her abrupt departure not only baffled his intentions but, to him, looked so much like a decided rebuff that his face flushed again.

Young Kirk, who had remained silent after the others came, now walked away. If he felt elated over his good fortune he gave no sign, but it was apparent at a glance that he was a man who did not carry his mind on his face, where every one could read it.

When he had gone Montclair was left alone with the three new-comers.

"Quite an adventur', mister," said Yank.

"Yes," replied the hotel-keeper, surlily.

"I consait that was Nelson Langleigh's daughter."

"It was."

"Pooty as an angel, by hurley! Why couldn't I hev been the one ter save her, an' git her ondyin' gratitood?—though I s'pose that jest afore the crisis my left foot would 'a' got skeered an' tried ter run away—it's an egregious coward, the weak sister is."

"You're just as well off," observed Montclair, rather vaguely.

"An' the young feller—Kirk. Who is he?"

"John Kirk is his name, and he is superintendent of the baths, at Langleigh's place."

"Another o' the bilers, eh?"

"A mere servant!"

With this parting remark, which was viciously made, Montclair rode away, and Yank, Ben, and the mute Modoc were again left to themselves.

"We had better go on," said the mountaineer, "or thar may be more distressed damsels comin' this way. I've noticed that one triberlation follers another."

Blacklock Ben mentally made the observation that if John Kirk did not want to get into trouble, it would be well for him to refrain from becoming a hero again to Montclair's exclusion. The rover had never seen either men until that day, but it was very clear to him that Montclair was not the person to tamely brook a rival.

If John Kirk came between him and Miss Langleigh, it would be policy for the former to look well to his own safety.

"That gal," continued Yank, "is a rare specimen. I consait that I'm a jedge o' females, an' I must say she fills my eye ter a charm. She reminds me o' Joan of the Ark, a heroine o' old times—though why she was called that I don't know; she wa'n't in the Ark, at all, unless the family records left by my great-uncle, Noah, is wrong. There's nothin' like havin' a good pedigree an' hist'ry, Ben."

"Very true, and there is no danger that you will ever suffer for want of these things, I think."

Conversation took a new turn as they reached the village, and, commenting on various objects by the way, Yank led the rover to a shanty at the northern limit of the place. This humble building he had duly hired at a low figure, and here he and Trail-Lifter had lived since coming to Medicine Springs.

True, they were away at least half the time, but the shanty was their headquarters.

Yank made Buckingham welcome, and was anxious to entertain him properly, but the rover was easily satisfied. He lay down, produced a pipe and began smoking quietly; Yank prepared supper for the trio, which they ate with good appetite. The mountaineer then asked his guest if he would like to go out and see the town, but Buckingham politely declined.

The evening passed uneventfully, and Ben seemed quite content to lie and listen to Yank's stories of experience. Brief as was their acquaintance, the younger man found much to admire about the tall mountaineer.

Later, each man took a blanket and lay down upon the floor—for the shanty did not boast of a couch more luxurious. In a short time all three appeared to be asleep.

An hour passed; then Blacklock Ben slowly



raised himself to a sitting position. He glanced at Yank and the mute Modoc; both appeared to be fast asleep.

With great care the guest arose and stole toward the door; in a few moments he was in the outer air. Once he glanced back, but the other men were still quiet.

"I am safe," he murmured, under his breath.

If he had but known it, he had done strangely well to leave the shanty unheard by Yellowbird; usually the mountaineer was aroused by the slightest sound, but luck was in favor of the rover.

The latter moved carefully until fairly clear of the vicinity; then he increased his pace, and walked rapidly toward the western limits of the town.

What was the object of this night journey? What had caused him, a man who professed to be in Medicine Springs without an object, to start off so suddenly upon this secret expedition?

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE MAID OF THE MOUNTAIN.

ONE of the inhabitants of Medicine Springs was a lady who bore the unromantic name of Hannah Kitchen. She had borne the aforesaid name ever since she entered the world, fifty years before, and as she had never married, there were those unkind enough to call her an "old maid."

Since coming to Medicine Springs she had occupied a small house by herself, and had earned a livelihood by honest use of her hands, soap and water. To be more definite, she "took in washing," and it is to her credit that she not only sent the various garments away looking very white and neat, but she did not tear off buttons and rend the cloth into strips, after the fashion of some of her calling.

Ten minutes after Ben Buckingham left the mountaineer's shanty he rapped at the door of Hannah Kitchen's house, and, after a brief parley, was admitted by that estimable lady.

Perhaps five more minutes elapsed, and then a second person knocked at the same door. Miss Kitchen answered the summons. She bore no lamp in her hand, but a ray of light from an inner room fell upon the applicant's face as she crossed the threshold.

It was Imogene Langleigh, the heroine of the adventure of the previous chapter!

The door closed, and was not again opened for an hour. What mystery did it hide? Miss Langleigh, Ben Buckingham and Hannah Kitchen were sitting together in the little parlor, engaged in earnest conversation. Plainly, the first two, who had that afternoon met as complete strangers, and had not exchanged a word on that occasion, had now come together by means of a previous understanding.

For a man who had no object in life except to kill time, and who had come to Medicine Springs out of mere curiosity, Blacklock Ben was getting on rapidly.

Miss Langleigh was the daughter of the great man of the town; a lady of irreproachable character and manners; the envy of her own sex and the object of admiration of the male population. No common object would have caused her to take this secret journey at such an hour.

Why had she thus met Buckingham?

At the end of an hour both came out, attended by Hannah Kitchen.

"You had better let me walk home with you," suggested the rover.

"I dare not," replied Miss Langleigh.

"But you may meet some rough character."

"I think there is no danger—in any case, there would be more if I was seen with you. That don't sound very complimentary on the surface, but you understand."

"Certainly; and you are quite right."

They separated, and Imogene hastened away through the lowering mantle of night.

"For a young lady," quoth Hannah Kitchen, as she closed the door, "she is the noblest, highest-minded woman I ever saw. I am proud of her confidence, and I only praise them as is deservin'. I am no sycophant!"

It was the pride of Miss Kitchen's life not to be a sycophant—or "sycophant," as she mispronounced it—and she never missed a chance to make it known.

Ben Buckingham went directly back to Yank Yellowbird's shanty, and by the use of great caution regained the cover of his blanket without disturbing his companion, he believed. Shortly after he was sleeping soundly.

When morning dawned the trio arose and Yank prepared breakfast. He seemed wholly unsuspecting of the events of the night, and when, after the meal, Ben stated that he was going out for a ramble, asked the young man to continue at their humble quarters if he would.

"To be sure, I don't often take in strangers," he remarked, "but you hev a home-like way about ye which sorter pleases me. While ye're gone, Blacklock, keep a lookout fur triberlations an' distresses. Thar's low cunnin' goin' on ev'rywhar, an' atrocious insex who don't keer a cent fur human life."

"I have seen too much of danger to be alarmed by it, mountaineer, and I think I can say as much of you."

"I dunno," gravely replied Yank. "I'd be all right only fur my left foot, but that's a weak sister, as I tol' ye afore. The mania the weak sister has fur gittin' skeered, an' puttin' me inter close corners, is egregious. Member distinctly when I's about ter run the gantlet among the Kimanches, once, I'd got all ready an' was bold as a sheep, but jest at the critikal moment I made an alarmin' diskivery. My left foot was gone; the weak sister had got skeered an' run away."

"You were certainly left in bad shape for running the gantlet. How did you manage it?"

"Got leave ter go an' hunt the weak sister up, an' when I found it I neglected ter go back ter the Injuns."

"You were fortunate in the end, anyhow, but I trust that I shall not meet with any such adventure. You shall see me back before night, Yank. Good-day!"

Buckingham threw his rifle across his shoulder, and moved away toward the east. On this occasion, at least, he had no further object in view than to see the country. The hills beyond the town attracted him, and he knew that from their summit he would have a fine view of all Cutwater Gap.

He soon reached the base of the hills; then, moving with the ease of one blessed with strong limbs, he steadily ascended until near the summit.

Selecting a suitable place, he paused and looked back. The whole valley lay revealed to his gaze, with its boundary line of cliffs on two—almost three—sides.

There lay the fertile plain like a robe of green; there flowed the Serpent River with its silver line; there rose the cliffs, surmounted by waving pines; and there was the town itself, the hotel and the bath-establishment, forming a strong contrast to the smaller buildings.

"Such is the scene of my labor," thought Buckingham; "such is the place I have come hundreds of miles to find. What will be the result? Shall I go away baffled, or blessed with one feeble victory, or will the whole great work be done?—the battle be fought out in this little valley, so far from where the drama began?"

His strong face grew stern and somber, and his hands moved restlessly on the barrel of his rifle. An aimless wanderer he might avow himself to be, but it was clear that no common motive had brought him to Medicine Springs.

Suddenly, as though annoyed that he should dwell on the subjects which occupied his mind, he arose and glanced toward the summit of the ridge.

As he did so, he saw an unexpected sight.

Upon a ledge, scarcely more than fifty yards away, stood a female figure.

Buckingham looked in surprise, for he had not expected to see a woman there, but his wonder decreased somewhat as he saw that the unknown was not of pure white blood. She was an Indian, or more likely a half-blood, and a wild, picturesque garb heightened the effect of her dusky face and black hair.

Her attitude was one of graceful repose, and she seemed unconscious of his proximity; leaning upon a rifle, she was gazing fixedly toward the valley.

The rattling of a stone called Ben's attention to a point nearer at hand; then his rifle was quickly raised.

Only a few steps away stood a grizzly bear. The animal had come to a halt, and was curiously contemplating its human neighbor. Blacklock Ben would gladly have seen it move on, but this it did not seem inclined to do.

Suddenly he saw an evil light leap into its eyes. Evidently it had before been in bad temper, and though temporarily surprised, its anger now rose against the rover.

With a menacing growl it abruptly rushed toward the young man, who was taken by surprise. It was not his way to be alarmed, however. His rifle sprang to his shoulder; his finger pressed the trigger.

Only a harmless click followed; the weapon had missed fire.

Ben cast it aside, drew his knife and dropped upon one knee. The outlook was threatening; he must fight the brute hand-to-hand, and his chances were not bright. He had seen grizzly bears before, and though nothing could shake his courage, he mentally bade farewell to the world and life.

Hark! Was it fancy, or did he hear the crack of a rifle? If so, he did not heed it; a blow from the bear's paw stretched him on the ground, and then followed a period of oblivion.

It was brief, very brief; for he was not fully stunned. The confusion partially left his mind; he opened his eyes, and at the same moment sprang instinctively to his feet. He was dizzy and bewildered, and he pressed his hands to his head and looked almost vaguely around.

The first thing that he saw was the bear; it lay dead only a few feet away.

The next sight was more surprising, and he stood still and looked in wonder as he saw the unknown maid of the mountain. This time she was not on the ledge, but nearer to him than the fallen grizzly. In her hands she held his own hat, which was filled with water; evidently she

had used it, in lieu of a better article, to get water with which to bathe his head and resuscitate him.

This was certainly very charitable work, but a deep flush became perceptible on the girl's dusky cheeks.

"I—I beg your pardon!" she said, in deep confusion; "I did not know—"

"I see nothing to apologize for," answered Ben, after a vain effort to use his dizzy head and see such cause.

"But—your hat!"

She glanced down at the head-covering and its contents of water, and then the ludicrous feature of the case seemed to strike her, and she broke into a laugh in which Blacklock Ben heartily joined.

His head was nearly as good as new now, and as he saw that the girl, though evidently of mixed blood, was very pretty, he would willingly have forgiven such use of his hat even under less pressing circumstances.

"You need not apologize," he observed, "for I clearly see that you were bringing water for my good. The hat is not injured, and I owe you thanks, instead of forgiveness."

"You confronted me so suddenly that I hardly knew what I said or did," she returned, an amused smile still on her face. "You see, I was afraid you were actually lifeless, and you all at once became very active."

The water having been poured from his hat, Ben restored the latter to its proper place, and then glanced from the dead bear to the small rifle which leaned against a rock a few paces away.

"I owe my life to you, I think," he said.

"To me?" echoed the girl.

"Yes. Yonder grizzly has a bullet-hole through its head, and there is powder-stain upon your rifle. A remarkable eye you must have, for it is no common feat to kill Old Eph with a single shot."

"But it was not I who fired."

"Not you?"

"No."

"Who was it, then?"

"It was—"

The girl paused suddenly; then, with some embarrassment, added:

"Somebody else."

"But the powder-stains on your rifle?"

"Never mind; don't ask too much. You ought to be content."

"Content!" repeated the rover. "By my life, I am more than content; I am deeply grateful. Whoever fired—and I do not forget the tell-tale traces on your rifle—the shot saved my life; while if you did not fire, you certainly were on the point of trying to resuscitate me. Young lady, I thank you sincerely—I owe my life to you."

He extended his hand. She hesitated, colored again, and then placed her own plump, brown hand in his.

"You are certainly very welcome, sir."

"My name is Ben Buckingham. May I ask that of the brave girl who has saved me?"

"I tell you again that it was not I who fired, but as for my name, it is—Zelda."

"Zelda! A peculiar name."

"I dare say it is, to you."

"May I ask if you live in the village?"

The girl hesitated, and he saw that she looked annoyed.

"Pardon me, if I have asked too much," he added.

"There is nothing to pardon," she answered; but it was noticeable that she still withheld the information.

"Probably," Ben continued, "you will, at least, tell me who, if not yourself, fired the timely shot that saved me."

"Even that I must refuse to tell," replied Zelda with a faint smile. "I don't know but you will think me a barbarian, but—I have my reasons."

"I certainly shall not class you as a barbarian, but I am beginning to think I must pronounce you a strange girl."

"Some people says girls are always strange," was the arch reply.

"And mysterious."

"Have you no secrets of your own?"

Blacklock Ben started; he knew better than any one else how well-aimed the retort was. He looked more keenly at the girl, but her appearance was as quiet as her tone. He decided that it was only a chance reply.

"I trust that I have no guilty secret, at least," he answered. "But now, as to you and me. We have met; I owe you gratitude. I hope the acquaintance thus begun will not end here and now."

"I seem fated to refuse all you ask," was the slow reply, "but I am obliged to say—the acquaintance must end here and now."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### YANK HAS AN EXPERIENCE.

BEN BUCKINGHAM sustained a feeling of disappointment and chagrin. He was not a man easily impressed, but he had yielded far more to Zelda's charms than their brief acquaintance seemed to justify. There might be Indian blood in her veins, but that did not prevent her



being very pretty. Her dusky face was regular and bright; her black hair was fine and silken; and her wild, half-Indian costume set off her dark beauty to perfection.

He had mentally observed that hers was an acquaintance he would be glad to keep; now she dashed his hopes to the ground at one blow.

Something of his feeling must have been expressed on his face, for Zelda hastily added:

"I hope I have not offended you?"

"Offended I have no right to be; disappointed I certainly am," he answered.

"Believe me, I have good reasons for my course," she earnestly said.

"No doubt."

"At the best, I should be only a poor acquaintance."

"Why so?"

The question seemed to embarrass her; she hesitated and finally replied:

"I am an Indian girl."

"A remarkable one, I'll take my affidavit. Tell me, at least, how you gained the education you must possess to speak as well as you do. Was it at a school, or did your white blood come from a white master who taught you well?"

"At school," she answered, after a pause.

"You were undoubtedly an apt scholar, and your education and intelligence fit you for a life more—"

The speaker stopped; he decided to let the remark remain unfinished, and did so. Zelda showed some embarrassment again, and, suddenly turning, took up her rifle.

"I must leave you now," she said.

"To meet again—when?"

"Perhaps never."

"Is this your wish?"

Zelda did not reply at once, and he could not but notice that her face had grown full of gravity, if not sadness.

"We are all creatures of fate," she finally answered. "It was that which brought us together, to-day; the same chance may cause us to meet again. Further than that I can say nothing."

"Let me say once more that I thank you sincerely, and that my best wishes are yours."

The girl went her way. For a few moments her graceful form was visible; then the rocks hid her from view and Ben Buckingham was alone. He turned with an irritable manner and picked up his rifle. The dead grizzly lay before him; and he could not but notice the accuracy of the shot which had prostrated the animal.

"Straight through the eye!" he muttered. "Good nerves were needed for that shot, and she would put many an old borderer to shame, I should say, for, of course, it was she who fired. Well, she has appeared and disappeared like a shooting star, and here the episode ends. She has given me my *conge*, and I'll accept it as gracefully as possible."

He had lost his fancy for mountain exploration, and he threw his rifle across his shoulder and began the descent of the hills, mechanically marking the locality of Yank Yellowbird's shanty.

"Honest Yank!" he muttered; "he is one of the few men one meets who is worthy of acquaintance and confidence. He is a good friend for me to have at Medicine Springs. As far as I have yet seen him his manner is as quiet as that of a spring day, but report says he is a lion in battle. He is called the Hustler of Hard-scrabble, whatever that means; and the Indians have named him Nevermiss. No doubt that long rifle of his is a deadly weapon."

The rover descended to the plain, and then went on to the village. Yank stood in front of his humble residence. Ben noticed something else, too, but thought nothing of it then.

A woman was advancing toward the shanty. There were other similar structures near at hand; there was nothing to show her destination; and as he knew so few persons in the town, he gave her only a casual glance.

"What luck?" Yank asked.

"No bad luck."

"That's sayin' a good 'eal. Thar's sech an egregious pile o' tribulation an' distress in the world that a man is mighty lucky ter make a draw, an' not git wusted. To be sure, a man o' backbone kin pull through 'most any pinch, but it sometimes worries him like hurley."

"Very true; man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward, as somebody has said."

"I don't know about the sparks, fur I never did take ter sparkin'. I had all other complaints when I's young, but that one passed me by."

Buckingham entered the hut. Trail-Lifter was engaged in the un-warrior-like duty of repairing a moccasin. Ben intended to rejoin Yank and this he proceeded to do after a few moments; but when he reached the door, he paused. Yank was no longer alone.

The woman whom Ben had seen had come to a halt near the mountaineer, and they were engaged in conversation. More than this, Ben recognized the woman; it was Hannah Kitchen, his hostess of the previous night.

He paused by the door, and the conversation of the maiden lady and Yank was distinctly audible.

"I hope you'll pardon me fur interruptin' on

ye, Mr. Yellowbird," Hannah was saying, "but I have come out on important business."

"No death in yer family is thar?" asked the mountaineer, with deceitful gravity.

"Sir, I am a lone woman," Miss Kitchen replied.

"What do you loan—money?"

"You don't onn'erstand me, Mr. Yellowbird; I mean that I am alone in the world—alone in the wide, wide world!"

The lady was growing emotional, but Yank's reply was very practical:

"Not much you ain't; you've got lots o' comp'ny. Why, there is a good two hundred folks in Big Medicine—plenty o' comp'ny, I should say."

"Ah! but they are dull an' ona'preciative!" sighed Miss Kitchen. "It is not the communion o' the common herd that my inner bein' craves. Mine is a nature which soars aloft to the cloud-encircled sp'ars o' the sublime, and grasps arter the tender sympathy o' congenial spirits."

"Land o' Goshen! is that a fact?" asked Yank soberly. "By hurley, I'd never s'pected you was given ter the use o' spirits. It's a costly luxury whar whisky sells as high as it does in Big Medicine."

"Oh! oh! my dear Mr. Yellowbird, you wholly misunderstand me. Not ter save my temp'ral life would I tech any o' the vile beverage you mention; I am not a wine-bibber nor a trav'ler in the bonds o' iniquity—my inner bein' revolts at the mere thought o' the compound called whisky."

"That a fact?"

"It is, indeed."

"My inside bein' ain't made that way, but we can't all be alike. Yer scroopies are prob'ly the proper thing."

"Thank you, Mr. Yellowbird; your sympathy, your words o' kindness, is very grateful to a lone woman who sighs in vain for congenial companionship. I won't forgit it on you, dear Mr. Yellowbird. An' this reminds me, I have come ter ask a favor; I want ter borrer, ef you kin lend."

"My bank account is rawther low, jest now."

"It is not low, base money I desire; it is a fryin'-pan."

"A—what?"

"A fryin'-pan. My own is broke, an' I can't find one in Medicine Springs. I thought mebber I could borrer o' you."

Miss Kitchen smiled sweetly upon the mountaineer, but he shook his head gravely.

"Don't see how I kin obleege ye, by hurley! My fam'ly is large, an' constantly increasin'; while as fur their appetites—land o' Goshen! they're amazin'. This mornin' I cooked all o' a buffler cow but the bones, an' thar was sech a demand fur fodder that I actually wound up by fryin' them, too. Don't see how I kin spare the fryin'-pan, really."

"Let me suggest a way. Come yourself an' partake at my own hospital board; I shall be glad to cook fur you, Mr. Yellowbird—you an' yer friends."

"Thank ye, thank ye," replied Yank, hastily, "but I couldn't think on it. I'll tell ye what I'll do; I'll think the matter o' the fryin'-pan over, an' send yer word."

"Won't you bring the answer yerself?"

Miss Kitchen beamed sweetly upon the mountaineer.

"To be sure—sartain."

"Mebbe I'll hev a lunch set out fur you."

"Don't do it; I don't want ter rob yer hospital board."

"I hope I haven't annoyed you by comin'?"

"Land o' Goshen, no! I'd be an egregious clown ter be riled up so easy. Besides, everybody comes ter me fur help. 'Member distinctly when a pooty cousin o' mine, who was a female poet, called on me ter help her. Thar was tears in her eyes, all on a'count o' a poem which was workin' on her, an' harrerin' her up."

"So you had a poet in your family. How sweet!" and Hannah clasped her hands ecstatically.

"How sweet? Wal, she was 'bout as sweet as honey, that gal was. But ter resoom: When I seen her tears I was egregiously upso't. 'What's the matter?' sez I. 'The feet won't come right,' sez she. 'Got corns, has they?' sez I. 'I mean the poetic feet,' sez she. 'To be sure,' sez I, though I had no idee what she was drivin' at. 'All poetry,' sez she, 'is divided inter feet. Now I started on a dactyl, and it will run ter a trochee.' 'Them's fur the voice, ain't they?' sez I, though I couldn't see how a poem could hev bronchitis, unless it was on-common bad. 'Not in poetry,' sez she, sighin' dolefully; 'oh! dear, I don't think I have dipped deep enough in the Pierian spring!' 'Thar's lots o' water in the trough out by the shed,' sez I, 'though I don't think a bath would be pleasant thar in this zero weather.'"

"Mr. Yellowbird, I'm afraid you don't a'preciate gen'us," gravely observed Miss Kitchen.

"I consait that I a'preciate beauty in distress!" stoutly replied the mountaineer. "Ef I don't, my name ain't Yellowbird."

Miss Kitchen simpered, and half turned her head away. She regarded this as a leading remark. Was not she "Beauty in distress," while she was in need of a frying-pan?

"Mr. Yellowbird," she said, tenderly, "why don't you change your name to Canary?"

"Ter Canary?"

"Yes."

"Wal, I skeercely see the good on't. I ain't stole a hoss, nur done no other mean trick."

"But Canary means the same as Yellowbird, an' is more romantic."

"To be sure, but 'twon't fit me. I ain't built right fur a canary, nor I can't sing no more'n a buzzard. Besides, I'd be sech an egregious homely canary that nobody'd want me—"

"Dear Mr. Yellowbird, don't say that!" sweetly implored Miss Kitchen. "I am sure I know of one—"

"One Canary!" hastily interrupted Yank. "Then that's enough. Let him do all the singin'; my voice ain't tuneful nohow; an' all Big Medicine would pack up an' move, ef I sat up fur a warblin' canary-bird. But I'll see ye ag'in about this—an' the fryin'-pan. Jest now I've got an engagement, so I hope ye'll excuse me. Prob'ly I'll bring over the fryin'-pan soon."

Hannah thanked him gratefully and went her way, her mind filled with tender, bewildering thoughts.

"I am sure Mr. Yellowbird admires me, an' has intentions," she thought. "How touchingly he referred to the fryin'-pan! Ef he urges me strongly, o' course I'll be his own, but he really ought ter change his name ter Canary. Here I've lived all my life, under the crushin' weight o' the unromantic name 'Kitchen,' an' Yellowbird don't please me greatly, either. But Canary is all that a refined mind could desire!"

In the mean while, Yank had made a hurried retreat to the hut.

The first thing he saw was Buckingham's amused face, and the mountaineer's expression was so lugubrious that the younger man could not avoid an audible laugh.

"I now understand, friend Yank, what you meant when you told me, yesterday, that you had given up wandering for awhile, and settled down here. It seems that Big Medicine has an attraction for you."

The mountaineer heaved a deep sigh.

"So you seen an' heard it. By hurley, I ain't had an experience ekul ter that fur years. Talk about my left foot bein' skeered! Why, the weak sister was a hero, this time, compared ter the rest on me. The way that woman looked at me was awful. I'd 'a' run, only I was too weak ter go. Talk about *her* inside bein', ez she expressed it! Land o' Goshen, it wa'n't nothin' compared ter *my* commotion."

"Nevermiss, that lady means matrimony!"

"I consait she does."

"And you are the object thereof."

"I ain't experienced in sech matters," replied Yank, caressing his beard in a troubled way, "an' I'd thank ye fur p'int. Is it a sign o' matrimony when a woman goes ter borrer a fryin'-pay o' a single man?"

"I believe it is so regarded," Ben gravely replied.

"Then I'm a lost man, by hurley!"

"Not so badly lost but she will find you."

"To be sure, an' that's jest what worries me. That woman means business, an' I know it. Wants me ter change my name ter Canary! Land o' Goshen! what a trick that would be fur a man who kin trace his pedigree back ter Adam an' Eve!"

"You ought to meet her half-way in the matter, for I am sure she would change her name from Kitchen to Canary, if you asked her."

"Young man," quoth Yank, solemnly shaking his forefinger at Ben—a confirmed habit with him—"Miss Kitchen kin change her name ter Parlor, or Pantry, or even Suller, ef she wants ter, but you kin bet I won't make no egregious mess o' *my* name. I'll defy all the old maids, an' die as I've lived—plain Yank Yellowbird!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE SECRET SERVICE SLEUTH.

JOHN KIRK was busy in Langleigh's bathing establishment.

This edifice, though almost as plain as a barn externally, had many claims to style and luxury inside. If Langleigh charged high prices for the privilege of using the spring-water, he certainly did not neglect the comfort of those who patronized him, while they were inside the bath-house.

This building was erected directly over the springs, which were four in number. At least, the water had four outlets, though, beyond question, it sprung from one common source.

When Langleigh erected his bath-house he did more. He was shrewd enough to know that if people could use the water after it left his establishment, for nothing, they would not pay him to use it inside. Such being the case, he had hired men and constructed a conduit, securely sealed from meddlers, by which all waste water was conveyed to Serpent River, less than a hundred yards away.

Thus Mr. Nelson Langleigh utterly controlled the wonderful springs, and though, like all prosperous men, he found plenty of people to accuse him of meanness, he went on accumulating wealth.



John Kirk had been superintendent of the bathing-establishment for four months, but had never been able to decide positively whether there was any real medicinal virtue in the spring-water or not.

Even as some disinterested person said there was, and others averred there was not, so John saw some patients go away declaring that they had been cured by the use of the water, while others departed declaring that the whole thing was a fraud.

Kirk could not be blind to the fact that large sums of money were left in town, and that nearly all went into the pockets of three individuals. Langleigh furnished bathing facilities; Todd acted as physician, and Montclair gave them lodgings at the Hygeia Hotel.

Each of these favors cost the patients decidedly large sums.

At times Kirk was strongly of the opinion that the "cure" was all a humbug; that its "discoverers" had never had reason to believe any medical virtue existed in the waters; and that Langleigh, Todd and Montclair had gotten up the "boom" with deliberate intention to deceive and defraud others. Certainly they were reaping all the benefit.

Kirk was an honest man, and he did not like the idea of being an employee of a nefarious clique, but as time went on, he had a motive for remaining where he was.

He saw Imogene Langleigh. At first sight he admired her, and the more he saw, the more he admired.

Her eyes were more potent than the salary he received—he remained at Medicine Springs, and continued as superintendent of baths.

On the morning after the events last described, John Kirk was in the main room of "The Hydropathic Bathing Establishment"—this was the sign over the entrance—and engaged in giving instructions to a new employee who bore the name of Agrippa Ames.

While thus occupied, Mr. Langleigh himself came in to make a tour of observation. Langleigh liked Kirk. His own ideas of a model bathing establishment were crude, but the young superintendent not only had a system which would have been creditable to any world-renowned resort, but he kept everything wonderfully neat and orderly.

Besides this, John Kirk had a very honest face and manner, combined with good education, intelligence, and a ready, though not voluble, tongue.

Mr. Langleigh believed that a better man could not have been found for the place.

On this occasion the great man gave less attention to these details than usual; he was in high spirits, and anxious to tell Kirk the latest news.

"John, have you paid attention to our telegraph line lately?" he asked.

"Not particularly, sir."

"The last wire will be put in place to-day."

"Indeed! That's good news."

"Right you are, my boy. Prosperous as Medicine Springs is, we have, heretofore been isolated from the rest of the world. The telegraph line will do away with all that. Connecting with the main line at Red Rock, we shall thus be able to get news right from the East in short time."

"It will be a great thing," answered Kirk. "When it is done you will only lack two things."

"What are they?"

"A newspaper and—a railroad."

"Egad! you're right there; we ought to have them. The paper it would be easy to start, but the railroad—that means expense, labor and time."

"But would it not increase your patronage greatly, since it would do away with the wearisome stage-journey?"

"It would; that's a fact."

Langleigh rubbed his stubbly chin, and meditated deeply for a few moments; then he suddenly aroused and added:

"I'll think this over, John. Anyhow, the telegraph will be a thing of fact to-night, and, to-morrow, an operator will be at the keys. I've engaged a young Frenchman, whose name is Julian Moriney, and Medicine Springs takes a boom with the first touch of his fingers."

"It will be a great step forward, and the line will be a sort of monument to your business enterprise."

This compliment pleased Langleigh more than ever, and all the more so because he was in remarkably good-humor. The telegraph line had been one of his pet ideas, and its speedy completion had had the effect of thawing out his icy nature a good deal.

He left the place somewhat later, and started for home, but was accosted on the way by Cecil Montclair.

The proprietor of the Hygeia Hotel did not seem to be in equally good humor; in fact, his gloomy air so impressed the elder man, that, after a little conversation, he asked what the trouble was with him.

"What do you think of Imogene's adventure?" Montclair abruptly replied.

"What adventure?"

"I mean the runaway."

"Egad! I don't understand now."

"Didn't she tell you that Nero ran away with her?"

"No."

"By Jove, he did."

Langleigh looked surprised.

"Imogene has not said anything to me about it. When did it occur?"

"Tuesday. He made a bolt; she lost control; I chanced to be near, and, seeing her danger, pursued to give my aid. What do you suppose was the result?"

"Tell me."

"Kirk saved her, instead of me."

"Ah! that boy is a handy fellow!"

"Handy be dashed!" angrily retorted Montclair. "What business had he to step between me and Imogene? You have yourself said that I shall have her as my wife, and now you favor that hound!"

"Stop, stop, my dear Cecil! I do nothing of the kind. John Kirk is not to be regarded as your rival; he is only a hired man—an inferior."

"He loves Imogene."

"I think you are mistaken, but, even if it is so, she would not think of him."

"Wouldn't, eh?" retorted Montclair. "Perhaps not; but I'll almost take my oath that she beat me off in the case I mention, just to favor Kirk. I should have been the rescuer, but just at the critical moment a covering which she wore over her shoulders, got loose and was blown by the wind directly into the eyes of my horse. It frightened the brute—he broke—I was left behind, and Kirk saved Imogene. Now, I'll almost swear that she intentionally freed that infernal garment, just to frighten my horse."

"Nonsense!" replied Langleigh; "you're wild."

"I believe it, just the same."

"It's likely a woman on a runaway horse would be as full of sharp tricks as that. Very unlikely!"

"A woman is always full of sharp tricks," retorted Montclair. "A man may engineer a big scheme, but for little, sharp, venomous ones, woman takes the palm. They're cunning as Old Nick, begad!"

"Well, we won't argue the point, but let it rest right here; John Kirk can't have Imogene!"

"Then discharge him."

"Discharge him!"

"Yes."

"Why the blazes should I do that?"

"It's the only safe way; they'll outwit us if you don't."

"By my life, they won't outwit us!" Langleigh avowed, emphatically. "I don't allow any one to outwit me. John Kirk is a mighty good man in my bathing establishment, and as I don't believe in your theory I'm not going to discharge him; but this much I will say: I'll keep my eyes open, and if I catch him making love to Imogene he'll get the sack. You can depend upon that!"

And with this promise Montclair was obliged to be content—or as near that as was possible.

Langleigh went on to his own house and found Sheriff Bob Bunker awaiting him. This visitor's face was grave.

"I've got bad news, Langleigh," he cried.

"That so? What is it?"

"Look at this!"

Bunker had drawn a paper from his pocket; he now removed it from some article which it covered, and laid the latter in Langleigh's hand. It was an elaborately gotten up affair of silk, in the shape of a shield, while in the center was an inscription which Langleigh at once read.

It was as follows:

"PRESENTED TO

"RICHARD MAINWARING,

"*The Secret Service Sleuth,*

"BY HIS ST. LOUIS FRIENDS."

Langleigh looked back to Bunker with a somewhat startled expression on his face.

"Where the fiends did you get this?" he asked.

"I found it jest outside the village."

"But—what does it mean?"

"You recognize that are name, don't ye?"

"Richard Mainwaring! That was the name of the son of Robert Mainwaring."

"Jest so; an' we heard that Dick Mainwaring had become a detective in St. Louis."

"True."

"Wal, the only way ter figure it is ter s'pose that he is now in Big Medicine!"

Langleigh started and looked nervously around.

"Great heavens! I hope not!" he ejaculated.

"Then how did that medal thing git hyar?"

Langleigh sat down and looked utterly demoralized.

"Bob Bunker, is he on our track?"

"I'm afeerd he is," Bunker replied.

"But he may be here by chance; he may never have known the truth about Granite Tower."

"We thought nobody knowed it, but Philip Templeton proved ter you that he knew, didn't he?"

"Yes, and it cost him his life," Langleigh answered, in a hard voice.

"So it did; I'll swear ter that, fur my hand sped the bullet which floored him."

"If young Mainwaring is here as his father's avenger we are at a disadvantage, for we don't even know him."

"I believe I do."

"Ha! What is your theory?"

"Thar is a critter sneakin' about hyar who looks a mighty sight like old Robert Mainwaring. He calls hisself Ben Buckingham, or Blacklock Ben. I b'lieve he is the Secret Service Sleuth!"

"Bob Bunker, if you have such an idea in your mind, don't delay a day about paying attention to the man. *Silence him!*"

"Consider Blacklock Ben a dead man!" Bunker coolly replied.

"Bob, I dreamed of Templeton last night. Are you sure you left him perfectly lifeless?"

"I'll take my oath on that. He an' the gal, Vivian, are both out o' the way. The job was done slick as a whistle."

"Then do as well by this Blacklock Ben. Don't stop to investigate; put him out of the way at once. If he is Dick Mainwaring we are not safe an hour. Remove him!"

"He dies inside o' twenty-four hours!" Bunker coolly replied.

## CHAPTER X.

### YANK YELLOWBIRD'S AFFLICTIONS.

THE office of Doctor Elnathan Todd was a very fine one for such a remote place as Medicine Springs, but he liked luxurious things, and many of his patrons were rich.

It was well for him, and the reputation of the town, that he should have stylish quarters.

On this day he was seated in his office, reading the latest paper. He was a man of middle age, with about two hundred and twenty-five pounds of flesh packed upon a frame by no means large; in fact, the doctor was decidedly corpulent. His smooth face was round, full and red, and what little of hair time had left him was also of a very pronounced red hue.

Elnathan Todd was not handsome, and he knew it, but he was getting rich at Medicine Springs, which seemed to him a matter of far more importance.

While he sat there upon this occasion a man entered and, pausing near the door, looked at him in a most melancholy manner.

That man was Yank Yellowbird.

"Good-morning, my friend," said Todd, blandly, and not in the least prejudiced by the fact that his visitor bore all his arms, even to the long rifle before mentioned.

"Mornin', doctor," was the terse, melancholy reply.

"What can I do for you?"

"I think," Yank steadily replied, "that I need ter be b'iled!"

"Boiled?"

"To be sure."

"I don't understand."

"I'm a subiect fur yer Hydrophobia Bath-House."

"Hydropathic is the word, sir; and as for process, we do not boil folks at all. The principles of Hydropathy consist of inward and outward applications of the curative waters."

"I don't need it in'ardly, 'cause I'm all right thar; an' even ef I's distempered thus, Montclair's whisky is cheaper than yer Hydrophobia water, an' burns a heap more goin' down."

"Well, well, we will see. Pray what particular affliction has led you to seek a disciple of Esculapius?"

Yank had taken a chair, and was on the point of laying down his hat, but at this point he paused suddenly and his lower jaw fell perceptibly.

"Escu— Which scalp did ye say?" he blankly asked.

"Esculapius was the word. In mythology he was the god of the healing art, and said to have been the son of Apollo and the nymph, Coronis."

"Doc," exclaimed the mountaineer, with gloomy energy, "is that chap alive now?—E. Skulpus, or whatever his name was, I mean."

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I've got somethin' o' a pedigree, myself, an' I'd like ter compare records with him. My fam'ly has never been able ter trace our ancestors further than Adam an' Eve, an' this flow in our pedigree has brought many a Yellowbird's head down in sorer ter the grave. Now, ef that egregious chap with the long name was alive, he might be able ter tell me more. I'd be glad ter git the news, even ef 'twa'n't furdur back than Adam's gran'father."

Todd looked something sourly at the mountaineer. He had thought to awe him by an exhibition of his superior knowledge, but it did not seem that he had succeeded.

"Well, my man, to come right down to the present time, what is the trouble with you?"

"Newrol'gy," solemnly answered Yank.

"Neuralgia, eh? Got a bad pain in your head?"

"To be sure. I've had bad ones afore, but I consait that this is the most egregious o' the lot."

"We will soon relieve you of it. There is no one thing upon which our spring-water has such



wonderful effect as neuralgia. The treatment is very simple; besides a bath each day, you will need to sleep in perfectly healthy rooms—Montclair's hotel is the only suitable place—and drink five times daily of the medicine water, slightly tintured with *Kar-ish-ko-ah*."

"Land o' Goshen! what's that?"

"*Kar-ish-ko-ah*," ponderously replied Todd, "is a pungent, medicinal herb indigenous to the shores of Lake Tanganyika, Africa, and gathered for us by natives at Uji. Being very scarce—"

"You don't say so!" suddenly interrupted Yank. "Do ye mean ter say thar is some o' that yarb right hyar in Big Medicine, an' me a-sufferin' with newrol'gy the wu'st way? Why, last night the pains was so sharp that my back-bone was yanked out o' j'int eleven different times, an' Still Tongue, my Modoc *proteger*, he did nothin' but put the j'int back, an' hang onter me when the newrol'gy paroxysms took me. He an' the pain wrestled all night, an' both on 'em hurt me egregiously. An' you ree'ly had some o' that weed right hyar! Land o' Goshen! why didn't I know it!"

Todd looked at Yank sharply, suspiciously. "Do you really mean to say you have before heard of *Kar-ish-ko-ah*?"

"Heerd on it! Heerd o' *Careless-crower*!" cried Yank, with enthusiasm. "Wal, I consait I hev! Why, when I was in Afriky it actually saved my life. You see, it was this way: Twelve on us was took captives by the atrocious insex called cannibals, an' four was sarved up right away fur stews an' roasts; but the rest on us was so egregious thin we was put in a pen ter fat up, like run-down beef-critters."

"In two months only three was left; one by one all the others had been taken out an' roasted. Now, I lived in constant fear o' gittin' fat, an' I seemed ter gain ten pounds ev'ry day. I wasn't skeered—none on me—but my left foot, which always was a weak sister—but, ree'ly, a man of my pedigree hadn't orter be made inter stews, roasts an' briles."

"Finally I got so fat my size was amazin', an' ef my clothes hadn't stretched, they'd bu'st open. Then I got so corpulent I couldn't git up, an' could only turn over by grippin' the grass an' pullin' like hurley. The myst'ry was, why wasn't I took out an' roasted? I never knowed the truth until I was rescued by a whaler's crew, an' then I found I weighed only sixty-one pounds an' an atom o' a fraction. Ye see, I'd labored under a delusion, an' had be'n growin' lean all the time, instead o' fat."

"Wal, I was egregious weak when they got me out on't, so they began ter feed me on the same weed you mention—*Careless-crower*. Doc, you may not b'lieve it, but I gained flesh so fast that my skin couldn't expand 'thout help fast enough, an' they had ter let out a tuck an' a pleat in it every day, like as though I'd been a young gal growin' fast in short dresses."

"That's what *Careless-crower* did fur me. I wish I had a pictur' o' myself 'before' an' 'arter' takin', but they was stole by the Mozambique Arabs when I was in Labrador."

Yank told this story with the most innocent and sincere air possible, but when he had finished the angry doctor pointed toward the entrance to the office.

"Do you see that door?"

"Is that a test question?"

"It will be a 'test question,' if you don't leave this office at once."

"But I ain't be'n b'iled," Yank expostulated.

"I only wish I *could* boil you, and I'd see that the water was as hot as it could be made."

"Land o' Goshen! what's the trouble, mister?"

"You have come here to be very witty, but you have utterly failed," warmly retorted Todd. "I only wish there was a law by which I could have you arrested."

"What! you wouldn't 'rest a man beset with newrol'gy an' other afflictions as I be, would ye? An' I was anxious ter try yer hydrophobia water-cure, too!"

"You are a humbug, and you need a flogging more than you need the Hydropathic cure."

"Do ye know anybody that is anxious ter do the floggin', Mr. Todd?" quietly asked the mountaineer.

"I know nothing about you," hastily replied Todd. "All I ask is that you will go. I—that is, we have all the patients we can accommodate now."

The speaker glanced at Yank's long rifle, and added:

"No offense, I hope?"

"To be sure thar ain't! While we agree on *Careless-crower*, we can't wal querril on other matters. As fur my newrol'gy, it's a heap easier; I think you've done me good a'ready. Maybe talkin' with ye is jest as good as takin' yer medicine."

With this bland observation, the mountaineer put on his hat and left the office.

"Somehow," he mused, "the doctor don't seem in good-humor ter-day. I tried ter cheer him up all I could, but he was cast down. That visit seems throwed away, an' I'll hev ter try somebody else next—mebbe Bob Bunker. Then thar is John Kirk, but he's an honest man, an' 'tain't likely he kin give me any p'int. I've got ter git at the myst'ry somehow, though, an'

I'll do it ef I hev ter heave Big Medicine upside down. Yes, I will, by hurley!"

He was striding along homeward, his angular face more earnest by far than usual, when three men suddenly appeared in his path.

He halted at once. These men were well known to him; they were Gault, Chickering and Wing, the three officers of law he had once undertaken to guide to Medicine Springs.

"Ha!" said Gault; "here is our old friend Yellowbird, the Hustler from Hardscrabble. Glad to see you, my man. Pray, have you recovered from your severe illness?"

"The newrol'gy has eased up a bit," Yank serenely replied, "though I'm afeerd my j'int will never resoom their old strength. The pain snapped my left leg out o' the socket, an' it can't be got back in ag'in."

Gault smiled grimly. He had overcome the anger he felt when Yank deserted them, and the tall mountaineer's peculiarities amused him.

"Perhaps we can engage you again," he suggested.

"Got more convicts ter hunt down?"

"We haven't found Templeton yet."

"That a fack?"

"It's only too true. The sheriff of this town accidentally put us on the wrong track, and we chased parties we did not want at all for a hundred miles."

"Why are ye back hyar? Is Templeton waitin' fur ye ter begin the race with him ag'in?"

There was a trace of sarcasm in Yank's voice, but Gault disregarded it.

"We are back to try and recover the trail where we lost it; indeed, we are of the opinion that the convict and his daughter may now be in or near Medicine Springs."

"Land o' Goshen! you must think they're fools ter hang 'round hyar waitin' ter be gobbled up."

"Nevertheless, I believe they are near, and the question is—will you again enter our service? You are called 'Nevermiss' by the Indians, because you use a rifle so well, and you may be equally infallible in other ways."

"I shall have ter pass the offer by, fur my time is pooty wal took up a'ready."

"We will pay you well."

"Money ain't no object; it's a matter o' time with me."

"I am extremely sorry that you refuse. We don't seem to have any luck, and we would be glad to have the aid of your wise head."

"I know a critter that would jest fill the bill ef he was hyar; but he's in Alaska, or som'ers else. His name was Short, but he had a long head. He was in the Ten-mile Canyon flood, an' the only man, or woman either, fur that matter, who lived through it. He saved his life by usin' his brains. When the flood come he jest stepped up an' drank water until it run out o' his mouth, he was so full. What was the result? He'd took in all the water he could hold, so it was out o' the question fer him to swaller more. He *couldn't* be drowned, an' he come out all safe."

"Your friend was a wonderful man, no doubt, and I believe that you are another, if you do have bogus attacks of neuralgia. I haven't given up hirin' you yet; but let it rest. Think it over. I'm resolved to capture Templeton and his daughter if it takes a year. If you go with us, there's money for you. Think it over."

The officers walked away, but Yank stood gazing after them with a most disgusted expression on his weather-beaten face.

"Go on, ye man-hunters, ef ye want'er," he muttered, "but when ye git my help you'll probably be aware on't!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### TURK TOBIN HAS A SHOCK.

ABEL GAULT and his fellow-officers went to the Hygeia Hotel and ordered a substantial meal. They ate it, and then Abel went forth to find Mr. Nelson Langleigh. The latter was not at his house, so Abram, the servant, stated that he thought he was at the telegraph office.

The detective was not aware that Medicine Springs could boast of such a place; but, being directed, found it readily. Langleigh was there, and in conversation with Julian Morincy, the newly-engaged operator.

Morincy was a young man—indeed, he seemed hardly to have reached his majority; and his French blood was perceptible at first glance, when one knew that such was his nationality. He was not a muscular person, but his face was decidedly attractive. It was a dark, almost swarthy face; and his hair and eyes were black, as was the slight mustache which graced his upper lip.

A handsome fellow was Morincy, and it had occurred to Langleigh while they talked that it would be well to keep him away from his house. Such a youth was just the one to impress a foolish, romantic girl, and if Cecil Montclair's suspicions were correct, Imogene already had too many admirers.

Langleigh started as Gault entered.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the officer, blandly.

"What! is it you, again?" returned Langleigh, in a voice which did not indicate great pleasure.

"As you see,"

"On your way to the States now, I suppose," continued Langleigh, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"Hardly. My game is not yet netted."

"No?"

"Not by a blessed sight. We followed the clew given us by your sheriff, and a fine chase it led us. We overtook the parties at last, but lo! they were not Templeton and his daughter, at all."

"That's bad, by Jove!" said Langleigh, trying to make his manner conform to his words.

"Confounded bad!"

"But haven't you secured a clew yet?"

"Not one, and now we have come back to take up the trail where we lost it. We unquestionably traced them to Medicine Springs, and I have an idea that they are here now."

"Impossible!" cried Langleigh.

"How so?"

"Our town is small, and they could not hide here so but that they would be discovered."

"I did not exactly mean that they were in the village, itself; they would hardly be so reckless as that, if aware of our close pursuit; but they may be in the adjacent mountains. I mean to make a most thorough search of the whole neighborhood."

"You can rely on my help, or, at least, that of our local officers. Sheriff Bunker will be sorry to hear that he put you on a false scent, and will do all that is possible to aid you in your praiseworthy work. He is a shrewd fellow—Mr. Bunker is—and the runaways can't long evade him."

"I hope not. Well, I mean to search every foot of the hill-country for them; I won't leave a stone unturned."

Langleigh rubbed his chin with unsparing severity. He was really as cool as ever outwardly, and his enunciation had never been more peculiarly deliberate and distinct, but, really, he was in a fever of excitement.

"Do you start at once?" he asked.

"We shall rest to-day, and start to-morrow."

"I hope you will succeed. Anyhow, you can depend on us for hearty co-operation. It shall never be said that Medicine Springs allows ruffians like that Templeton to go unmolested, if near her limits."

Gault returned his thanks, and then left the office.

"Who is this Templeton?" asked Julian Morincy, when the detective was gone. "Some road-agent?"

"No; an Eastern desperado, whom the detective is in search of. He traced him to Medicine Springs, and then lost the trail. It is a great pity."

"Ugh!" said the young Frenchman, with a shrug of his shoulders, "do you suppose the fellow is now near?"

"Templeton?"

"Yes."

"I have no idea, but it hardly seems likely. I hope you are not afraid of him?"

"Afraid!" echoed Morincy. "You forget that my blood is French. Still, I didn't suppose I was coming to a town where I should have to go armed to the teeth."

"Medicine Springs," said Langleigh, warmly, "is a law-abiding place, and so it shall be kept. No ruffian, come he from the East or West, shall be allowed to terrorize our town!"

"If it is tried, we shall all have to take a hand at the revolver," observed Morincy, as he mechanically manipulated the machine which stood at his elbow.

The telegraph line was not yet in operation, and some further delay in stringing the wires would prevent the sending of a message. The operator was at his post, however, and when connections were made, Medicine Springs would become a star of new brilliancy.

Langleigh soon left the office and sought Sheriff Bunker's quarters. His face bore such a troubled expression that that official could not well overlook it.

"Bad news?" he asked, quickly.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"These accursed detectives are back again!" said Langleigh, as he dropped heavily into a chair.

"Do you mean Gault an' his gang?"

"Yes."

"I hope they have ketched Templeton and his gal."

"They haven't, as you well know; but, Bob, their coming troubles me. Suppose they discover the truth?"

"How can they?"

"Bob, are you sure you—a—didn't leave any traces of your work in the hills? You know what I mean."

"Why, o' course we left traces," hesitatingly replied Bunker. "We didn't bury Templeton, nor the gal."

"You did not?" cried Langleigh.

"No."

"Then, by heavens, go an do it at once. Gault vows that he will search every foot of the hill-country."

"That infarnal fool will git himself inter trouble yet!" declared the sheriff, angrily.

"He'll get us into trouble, you mean."



"No, he won't, fur ef it comes ter a pinch, I'll wipe out these prowlin' Easterners as quick as I did Templeton. You kin rest assured o' that."

"For heaven's sake don't be rash, Bob."

"I won't, but ef it's a matter o' sink an' swim, I'll help myself—and you—afore I will Abel Gault an' his crowd. You may bet on that. But an ounce o' prevention is better'n a ton o' cure, an' I'll take a couple o' the boys, at once, an' go an' put all signs o' our work out o' sight."

"Do so, Bob, and make the graves deep."

"We will."

Bunker hunted up Rooks and Tobin; two spades were secured and secretly conveyed from the village; and then the trio set out for the place where the tragedy had been enacted which removed Philip Templeton and his daughter from Nelson Langleigh's path.

The sheriff and Rooks led the way; Tobin brought up the rear. The latter was strangely silent, and even nervous, but his mood passed unnoticed by his companions. They little suspected the state of Turk's mind.

In due time they reached the point where the two parties, each bent on murder, had separated, and the two men had remained behind to slay Templeton, while their companions went on with Vivian.

Bunker went to the edge of the cliff and looked over.

"The body is thar," he announced; "jest whar it fell when we pushed it over the edge, Rooks. We'll go down."

They found a sloping place, descended, dug a grave and placed the remains in it. Rooks asked permission to keep the coat, which was still in good condition, but Bunker forbade it. It was not only more stylish than the average garment at Medicine Springs, but was of a peculiar color—if any honest citizen of the town had particularly noticed what the escaped convict wore, the coat, if preserved, might result in mischief.

Rooks and Tobin refilled the pit, while the sheriff sat on a rock near at hand.

"Such is the end o' life," he observed. "While we live we hev our burdens ter bear, an' when we're dead we hev a heap o' dirt crushin' down on our breast. I can't say that this world is a hot-house o' joy an' bliss—I can't, by thunder! Philosophizers say we all hev our ups and downs but I notice thar is more downs than ups. Now hyar is this ar Philip Templeton. Once he's rich an' 'spectable, an' I s'pose he expected a marble monument when he passed in his checks. But hyar he lies in this lone gulch, an' jest ez like ez not he'll be overlooked when Gabriel corrals the rest on us at the end o' the world. Thar's a heap o' sorer an' disa'p'intment, and some considerable humbug, in life!"

It was seldom that Mr. Bunker moralized, but this seemed too good a chance to be lost.

The last spadeful of earth was placed over the silent sleeper; all traces of the interment were removed, and then the work was done.

"Now fur the other one," Bunker briskly added. "Lead the way, Turk Tobin."

Tobin did lead the way, but his movements were so slow that the sheriff was twice obliged to hurry him up. Finally he paused in an open space among the rocks, hesitated a moment, and then went to a recess between two boulders. This done, he suddenly started back.

"Why, it's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes."

Bunker peered into the recess.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Certain, I be."

The sheriff's gaze wandered searchingly about, and then sought Turk's troubled face.

"Be you sure ye did the job all right?"

"I be. I put the revolver right ag'in' her heart an' fired, an' she never stirred arterwards."

Bunker removed his hat and scratched his head. His mind was reasonably acute, and it was working in earnest. Once more he sought Tobin's face with his gaze, and he noticed that his subordinate never looked at him; his own gaze was persistently averted.

A sudden suspicion flashed upon the sheriff.

"Turk Tobin, you're lyin' ter me!" he exclaimed.

The fellow started nervously.

"What?" he cried.

"You're lyin' ter me, an' I'll be shot ef I don't believe you've done it from the first; I don't b'lieve you an' Lot Piper killed the gal, at all!"

Tobin's face was flushed, and his gaze was more persistently averted than ever.

"We did; we sartainly did, Bob!" he stoutly averred.

Bunker remembered his own scruples, which had led him to give Vivian Templeton to his subordinates to dispose of, rather than do it himself.

"You may ez wal own up," he said, grimly. "Come, confess that yer pity got the best on ye, an' ye spared her life. Ef that is the case ye want ter make it knowed right away, fur ef she's alive she'll hev your neck in a noose. Ef you own up we may be able ter fix things all right."

"Wal, sheriff, you're right," Tobin confessed,

"but thar ain't no danger o' the gal doin' no harm. We put her in Griffin's Well, an' o' course, she's gone under long ago."

"Griffin's Well, eh?" repeated Bunker. That's only a few steps away—we'll see how yer new story hangs tergether."

He strode away, followed by Tobin and Rooks, and was soon at the top of the pit. The sun was nearing the horizon, and as its rays did not touch the well, the bottom of the pit was too obscure to reveal anything.

"You'll hev ter go down, Turk," he said.

Tobin shivered at the idea, but dared not refuse; and when his leader had uncoiled his lasso, he consented with faint utterance. The rope was secured to his person, and they lowered him steadily.

It seemed an interminably long journey, and the thought of being deposited in the dark Well with his victim frightened him almost out of his wits. He tried to call to his friends above, to beseech them to draw him up again; but his words died silently in his throat. Pale with fear, he went on irrevocably!

## CHAPTER XII.

### OMINOUS PREPARATIONS.

As he neared the bottom of the pit Turk Tobin strove to pierce the darkness with his gaze and see the form of the wronged girl, but the obscurity of the place defied his vision. He would have given the world, had he owned it, to be well out of the adventure. His conscience had not troubled him for leaving Vivian Templeton to starve, but now that he seemed destined to see the proof of his crime, the full enormity of the deed dawned upon him.

His feet touched solid rock.

He was at the bottom of the Well.

Shivering like one with ague he looked fearfully around.

It was not hard to see in a dim way, now that he was down, and he expected a shock even greater than that which had gone before—but he did not see the body.

All around the narrow space he looked; no human thing, nor what had been such, was there except himself.

Stupidly he stared about, slow to accept the evidence of his own eyes, but the truth had to be realized at last. Save for his own presence, the Well was empty.

He looked mechanically up the sides of the pit; the walls were so smooth that no human being could climb them.

"She's gone!" he said, aloud, in blank amazement. "Jest as sure as I'm alive, she's gone!"

He paused to grapple with this astounding fact, and then a new light appeared in his eyes.

"I'm glad on't, by the eternal! I've done some mighty wicked things in my day, but that was the wust, an' I'm glad that gal's blood ain't on my hands. Somebody took her out—help come somehow—she got away. I'm glad she did!"

Feeling that he could face Bunker and make his report a good deal more bravely than he had come down the pit, he gave the signal by jerking on the lasso, and the men above commenced to pull at once.

It was no easy task, but after due labor Tobin's head once more arose to the light of day. Bunker was angry, for he had expected a different weight.

"Where's the gal, you fool?" he asked, but not a word answered Turk until he was landed on the level above.

He then made the terse announcement:

"Gone!"

"What?" cried the sheriff.

"The long an' short on't is, somebody rescued her. Thar ain't a blessed sign in the Well, an' thar's only one way ter a'count fur it. She was rescued by somebody."

Bob Bunker's face grew white with fear and passion.

"You dog!" he gasped, "d'ye know what you've done?"

"I know the scheme didn't work, an' she got away."

"Got away!" You say it right cool, don't ye? D'ye know what that means? You've put all our necks in a noose by yer soft heart an' soft head. The hull world will soon know the truth, an' we'll swing fur killin' old Templeton. D'ye understand? We'll swing—that's what we'll do!"

Almost foaming with rage, Bunker had seized his subordinate by the collar and was shaking him as a dog might a rat. And Turk Tobin felt about as small as a rat, then. This view of the case had not occurred to him when he was at the bottom of Griffin's Well, and exulting over Vivian's supposed escape, but now he seemed to see that noose of which Bunker spoke, and a gallows as well, and he only waited until the sheriff released him to drop upon a rock.

"How was I ter know she would git away?" he asked, lugubriously.

"You had yer orders, didn't ye?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't ye obey them?"

"Because I's a soft-hearted fool."

"Bunker, that gal must be found!" said Rooks, abruptly.

"S'pose you do it?" retorted the sheriff.

"Won't you help?"

"What's the good on't? She may be a hundred mile away, plannin' ter hev us arrested."

"An' then, ag'in', she may be right in Big Medicine, this minute. Whoever took her out o' Griffin's Well may have her in his house, an' she sick from the danger she went through."

"Thar's somethin' in that," Bunker admitted.

"My advice is that we git back ter town at once, an' jest settle the case up right away."

This was good advice, and the sheriff clearly realized the fact. He gave the word to get to their horses, and in a short time they were on the way back to Medicine Springs. They went in a frame of mind anything but happy; each and every man was badly frightened, and if Vivian Templeton was really at liberty, alive and well, they had good cause to be alarmed.

Whatever charge had existed against unfortunate Philip Templeton there was none against her, and she could boldly go to the nearest magistrate and lodge information against them for murder.

Clearly, they must strike to defend themselves.

As they approached Medicine Springs they came upon Lot Piper, Tobin's associate in consigning Vivian to Griffin's Well, and the sheriff at once took him in hand; he had been as negligent and guilty as Tobin, and must take his share of censure.

Somewhat to their surprise, Piper seemed relieved by the news.

"I'm glad ter hear it," he said.

"Glad!" echoed Bunker, "have you gone crazy?"

"No; but I thought I'd seen her ghost."

"What do ye mean by sech mummery?"

"I either seen the Templeton gal or her ghost, last night!"

The sheriff started.

"Where?"

"Right hyar in the village."

"But where—where?" Bunker angrily asked.

"Do ye know the hut occupied by the half-breed Injin gal, Zeldas?"

"Yes."

"Wal, ef I didn't see Vivian Templeton in the door o' that shanty, jest at dark last night, I seen her ghost. It scared me prodigious, fur I thought 'twas a ghost, sure, an' I run like a scart deer; I ain't got over the shock yet, an' I'd be right glad ter know it was a critter o' flesh an' blood I seen. I was afeerd ter mention it, fur you'd all a' laughed at me, but that's what I seen jest the same."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Bunker. "That Injun gal is always lopin' about 'mongst the hills, an' it would be jest like her ter find the female Templeton. Of course the latter screeched like a painter when she'd outslept the drug we give her. Result would be, she would haul her up somehow."

"But why hev they kept it dark all this while?" asked Rooks, thoughtfully.

"Very likely the Templeton gal was all broke up—nervous prostration, an' all that sort o' thing—an' she's been sick sence, 'tended by Zeldas. Now, we'll drop onto the female conspirators; we'll raid the hut an' nab our game this very night. I'll bet the female Templeton don't git away again—nor the Injun squaw. She must be silenced, too. Come on ter town, boyees, an' we'll fix this thing up. At midnight we raid the squaw's cabin."

They went on, but just as they reached the edge of the village, met Nelson Langleigh.

"I want to see you at one side, Bunker!" the elder man abruptly said.

Abram, Nelson Langleigh's servant, was as devoted to his master as he was unscrupulous. He knew something about the great man's private affairs, and the latter knew his servant's nature. As a result there was a bond between them; a bond founded on mutual interest, but not at all influenced by any prompting of honor.

During the time that Bunker and his men were absent in the hills, Abram came to Langleigh's private room with a cautious and secretive air.

"Can I see you, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly. Say whatever you wish."

"I have, at times, told you things of importance to you, Mr. Langleigh?"

"You have, indeed."

"If I could tell anything which concerned Miss Imogene, would you wish to hear it?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"I feared you would not think it respectful in me, sir."

"You are mistaken now; if there is anything I ought to know about my daughter, I am all the more anxious to hear it, because she is my daughter."

"Then, sir, if you will pardon me, I will say that she is conducting herself in a way which you may not deem just right. In plain words, Mr. Langleigh, I saw her in conversation, secretly, with a strange man to-day, and the place of their meeting was near Black Rock."

"Ah! have you any idea who this strange man was?"

"I have, sir, because I have seen him in the



village. His name is Buckingham. Some call him Blacklock Ben!"

If Abram was disappointed because his first revelation did not cause a sensation, he had no cause to feel that way now. Langleigh had been leaning forward in his easy-chair, but as Abram pronounced that name he suddenly recoiled, falling back in the chair like one collapsed. His face had suddenly become very pale, and the wild look in his eyes startled the servant.

"What! sir, are you ill?" he cried.

Langleigh put out one hand feebly.

"No, no!" he hoarsely muttered. "Wait!—give me time!"

Abram looked in wonder. He could not understand this great agitation, this alarm; and, indeed, it seemed strange. True, Langleigh had reason to fear Ben Buckingham, or so he believed from what Sheriff Bunker had told him. If Buckingham was "The Secret Service Sleuth," and the son of Robert Mainwaring, he was, for reasons best known to Langleigh, a man to be dreaded.

But what had this to do with his meeting with Imogene? She had no cause to fear Blacklock Ben, nor did she know of that old drama connected with Granite Tower.

What was there in the meeting of these two persons to so terrify iron-nerved Nelson Langleigh?

He slowly recovered his composure, and again addressed the servant:

"Are you sure it was Imogene and Buckingham?"

"I am, sir."

"Did you overhear what was said?"

"Not a word, nor did they see me. I was not sure you would disapprove of it, and I did not venture near."

"What of their manner? Was it light or earnest?"

"Decidedly earnest, sir."

"Affectionate?"

"I think not."

"Did you see the end of the interview?"

"No, sir."

"If there are further particulars, I will gladly hear them."

"There is nothing more, sir."

"Then you can go, Abram. Stay! Take this gold-piece; you are a faithful man, and I thank you sincerely. If there is ever more to tell, come to me. Now, go!"

Abram went. The moment the door closed behind him Langleigh sprang to his feet. By the exercise of all his self-control he had managed to remain calm outwardly, but every nerve seemed to rend its way through his flesh.

"Death and destruction!" he hoarsely whispered, "has it come to this? Ruin stares me in the face! That man is surely young Mainwaring, and he must know all. He is drawing the net about me, and unless I strike first, he will soon have me at his mercy. He must die at once; I will see Bob Bunker and bid him make haste!"

So saying he strode into the hall, donned his hat and went out. How he found the sheriff we have seen, and he was soon talking with him at one side. He told what Abram had seen, and emphatically added:

"Bunker, that fellow must die!"

"He shall!" the sheriff declared.

"Why don't you strike at once?"

"I will strike at once."

"Don't forget it. You are about as deep in the mire as I am, and Buckingham will bring us both to destruction if we give him the chance."

"Twenty-four hours later you kin count him up as a gone chicken. I'll put the boyees onter his track, an' he can't git away with the whole on us. As you say, it's ruin ter us ter let him live. He shall die, an' that's the end on it!"

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### WOULD-BE DEFENDERS.

BEN BUCKINGHAM entered Yank Yellowbird's hut just as the latter was preparing supper.

"Back ag'in?" said the mountaineer. "You've come jest in time ter nourish an' cheer the inner man. True, one ain't got no fatted calf, but men o' bone and muscle don't keer much fur calf. I consait that the proper thing fur a man is beef, an' beef that he's got ter chaw egregiously ter make it fit fur swallerin'. This shows it's strong, an' strength is what we all need, by hurley!"

"Your ideas are sound in the main," answered the rover, as he put his rifle away.

"To be sure. Still Tongue, bring out the silver plate an' finger-bowls, an' we'll hev a supper fit fur a king."

"You have not yet delivered the fryin'-pan to Miss Hannah Kitchen, I see."

Yank paused, looked earnestly at Ben, and then slowly stroked his sparse beard.

"The fryin'-pan is still hyar," he replied, "but I dunno how long 'twill stay. I hev an idee that I may hev ter buy Miss Kitchen off with the fryin'-pan."

"You forget that she wants you along with it."

Yank shook his fore-finger reprovingly at the rover.

"Young man, you are disposed ter make light o' my a'flictions. You don't know what it is ter be beset by an old maid, but I do. I've fit Injuns o' all nations, an' white outlaws, an' grizzly b'ars, an' eat scatteratem, as they say in Greek, but none o' them is ter be compared ter an antique female bent on matrimony. Why does Miss Kitchen come ter me ter borry fryin'-pans? Why does she want me ter change my name ter Canary? Don't she know that the Yellowbirds is a time-honored family that kin trace their pedigree back ter Adam an' Eve? Why should she pester me in such an egregious way? Ain't it enough that I should suffer with the newrol'gy, 'thout hev'n new a'flictions an' triberlations ter bear?"

The mountaineer was very much in earnest, and his fore-finger waved constantly in front of Blacklock Ben, punctuating his remarks, as it were.

"But Miss Kitchen would be a valuable nurse when neuralgia afflicted you," urged Ben, gravely.

"Yas, but the remedy would be wuss than the disease. You can't tell me nothin' new about old maids; I've been the victim on 'em ever sence I's born. It was my misfortune ter be an uncommon harn'some baby, an' they took ter me right at the start. I never expect to git rid on 'em unless I lose my personal charms."

"Why not marry Hannah, and then defy the others?"

"Can't do it, nohow; I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me. Ef that woman comes hyar ag'in ter borry a fryin'-pan I shall give the word ter my left foot ter run, an' the faster the weak sister strikes out, the better I shall like it."

"But why should you have such an antipathy to old maids? You and I are old bachelors. Ought we not to have a feeling of sympathy for the old maids?"

"You may furnish the sympathy—an' the fryin'-pans," gravely replied Yank. "I don't feel like it. At first view an old maid an' an old bachelor might seem pooty much alike, but thar's a heap o' dif'rence when you come ter simmer it down. Old bachelors are meek, an' humble, an' lowly, an' retirin'; they're timid critters that couldn't be bold an' designin' ef they tried. But old maids are a caution ter behold! They are schemers; that's what they be, an' thar ain't no safety while they're 'round. I've been awfully barassed by 'em, by hurley!"

"You seem to have borne up well."

"That's 'cause the Yellowbirds are o' a naturally buoyant natur'. Drop a Yellowbird anywhere, an' he'll land on his feet like a cat. But thar's one thing a Yellowbird won't do, an' that is ter change his name ter Canary. I ain't no singin'-bird, an' none o' my fam'ly ever was, 'ceptin' one o' my forefathers. He lifted up his voice in the wilderness an' wept—all 'cause an old maid was arter him!"

Yank stowed away an unusually large piece of meat, gave it a few turns in his jaws, and added:

"I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me!"

"Speaking of the fairer sex," said Buckingham, "let me ask if you know an Indian girl named Zelda?"

This was the first time he had mentioned to Yank the girl he had encountered in the mountains, and he would not have done so now only for new and urgent reasons.

The mountaineer suddenly ceased moving his jaws, and, with both cheeks stuffed out by the generous slice of meat he had just then, stared blankly at Buckingham.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Do you know Zelda, the half-blood?"

"Seems ter me I hev seen sech a person 'round hyar," the mountaineer replied slowly.

"A decidedly pretty girl."

"Wal, I dunno; my taste don't run ter Injun squaws."

Buckingham flushed; he felt offended at the term, though why he should do so he did not know. Zelda was nothing to him; she had the same as said so herself.

"At least, you are an honest man, Yank, and one who would not refuse to help the weak and friendless."

"I consait that you are right."

"Nevermiss, your aid is wanted now."

"Who by?" demanded the mountaineer, with unusual quickness of speech.

"To-night, while on my way to your hut, I overheard a few words spoken by some ruffians of the town. I arrived—unseen by them—just as they were breaking up, and there were only a few sentences which reached my ears. This, however, is what I overheard: There is some girl named Templeton against whom they have a grudge; she is ill in the hut of Zelda, the half-blood; and to-night, at twelve o'clock, these ruffians propose to secretly raid said hut and secure both girls. What their object is I won't undertake to say, but it is significant that they declared both girls must be 'silenced.' That's an ugly word, Yank."

The speaker had been watching the mountaineer's face as closely as the dim light would allow, anxious to see whether he had been right in hoping for his companion's sympathy.

It was now clear that Nevermiss was excited, though to what degree was not certain.

"Who was them atrocious insex?" was the quick inquiry, and Yank's voice was sharp and stern.

"The honorable sheriff of the town, Bob Bunker, and some of his pet followers."

"An' they're goin' ter raid the hut an' gobble the—the—some gals?"

"That is their plan."

Yank smote his broad hand heavily upon his knee.

"It won't work!" he exclaimed. "The atrocious insex has plotted in vain, fur there don't no women critters get persecuted when I know on't—not much, they don't!"

"Bravo, Nevermiss! I felt sure that I could rely upon you, and that's why I told you."

"You've done wal; you've done very wal; you've done most mighty wal, sir!" the veteran declared. "Let them egregious varmints swoop down onter lone gals! Not much! Whar's my rifle? Git ready fur the war-path at once, an' we'll wade in like hurley an' make—"

A whistle sounded from Trail-Lifter.

Yank promptly turned toward the mute Modoc; the latter's nimble fingers moved like a flash; and then the rifle which the mountaineer had seized in an iron grasp slowly slipped through his broad hand until the breech touched the ground.

Nevermiss had been excited—strangely excited for one of his cool nature, Buckingham thought—but he grew cool again in a few moments.

"The Modoc counsels moderation," he observed, "an' I reckon he's about right. To be sure, he is. It ain't midnight yet, an' we needn't git inter a flurry. Keep cool, Ben, an' let's talk it over."

As the rover had shown no signs of excitement a part of this advice seemed unnecessary, but Yank set a good example by quickly sitting down.

He turned his gaze sharply upon Buckingham.

"Was this all you heard?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why do them critters want ter molest the gals?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Queer, ain't it?"

"Not so very strange, perhaps, when we consider what ruffians they are and how pretty Zelda is. She may have refused to marry one of them."

"So you've seed Zelda?"

Ben hesitated; then replied:

"I have. We met by chance in the mountains, and she did me a great favor. In fact, only for her I should very likely have fallen the victim to a grizzly bear."

"I s'pose you think you owe her a debt o' gratitude."

"I do, indeed; but were it otherwise I should be ready to aid her now. Helpless woman always has a claim on honest man, and I am resolved that those ruffians shall not touch the girls while I live."

"Spoken like a hero, by hurley! You're a man arter my own heart, mister, an' I'm glad chance threw us together. I admire a man that is ready ter resk his life an' limbs fur a woman in triberlation an' distress. I'm a disciple o' beauty, myself, an' I'll do 'most anything ter help sech, except ter lend my fryin'-pan an' change my name ter Canary. I can't do that fur though thar is a heap o' feathered canaries in the world, my world, my own pedigree would only run back ter my own generation, an' 'twould make me an orphin ever sence I was born—yes, by hurley, an' before that too!"

Yank stroked his beard meditatively and was silent for some time, after which he added:

"Give me time! This is an egregious fix, an' as the sheriff an' other dignitaries is ag'in' us, we've got ter use stratagem ter outwit the atrocious insex. Let me roominate, an' I'll fix it."

Trail-Lifter uttered his peculiar whistle, and once more the mountaineer quickly looked that way.

Buckingham was more than ever convinced that the mute Modoc was a remarkable person, and he had begun to wish that he could read that silent language. All was unintelligible to him, however.

Rapidly the dusky fingers crossed and recrossed for a few seconds, and then Yank nodded thoughtfully.

"I reckon you're right, Still Tongue, an' we'll move at once. Come, Blacklock Ben, we'll go down ter the half-blood's hut an' give the alarm."

Buckingham was glad to get the word, and the three men promptly prepared for work. Each went well armed, and all looked well to their weapons. Blacklock Ben had a vague idea that there was more ahead of them than to warn Zelda—indeed, he would not hear of leaving her unprotected—but he waited patiently to learn Yank's plans.

The latter turned as they passed out of the door.

"Ben," he said, gravely, "I wish you'd keep an eye on my left foot, an' ef ye see any sign o' the weak sister gittin' skeered, an' runnin' away, jest hit it a crack with yer ramrod. I ain't sure



but it would be a good idee fur me to own a dog, an' make him guardeen o' the weak sister; then when the egregious thing got skeered he could sink his molars an' in-scissors inter the heel a few inches. That's a good idee, by hurley, an' I'll hev the dog!"

With this serious, earnest observation, the mountaineer led the way toward Zelda's cabin.

The night was dark and would well hide their movements in case of danger, but as they were early, they hoped to get along without any hostile encounter.

Buckingham felt additional interest in the matter because of the fact that he was again to meet Zelda. He had tried to forget her after the vain effort on the mountain to continue the acquaintance, but in vain; the memory of her dark, bright face persistently haunted him, and he was now almost glad of the chance which bade fair to bring them together.

Yank finally came to a halt.

"I'll thank you an' Trail-Lifter ter remain hyar, Blacklock Ben," he said. "It wouldn't be 'cordin' ter the rules o' fashionable serciety fur us all ter go ter the cabin in a body, ye know. Jest stay with the Modoc, an' don't come nigh until I give ye word. This matter must be delikitly handled."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### A DANGEROUS PURSUER.

THE mountaineer spoke earnestly, and Buckingham did not oppose his arrangement. He did, however, think that as he had been the one to discover the plot, he ought to be more prominently presented to those they aspired to rescue. Ordinarily he cared as little as any man for show and cheap honors, but Zelda was in his mind, and where is the man who would willingly miss a chance to appear as a hero in the eyes of the woman he admires?

Yank Yellowbird moved swiftly away, and Ben and Trail-Lifter were left as companions.

It was a pause rendered all the more impressive by the fact that there could be no conversation. Ben looked at the Modoc and wished that it were otherwise; he would gladly have broken the silence, but the Indian could not reply.

Trail-Lifter stood almost like a statue. Perhaps he leaned some weight upon his grounded rifle, but his lithe form was poised as though for a leap; and the rover noticed that the slightest sound was made an object of investigation by his keen eyes.

Time moved on; several minutes passed.

Buckingham began to wonder at the delay. Yank must know that every moment was a period of importance; the enemy had said that they would strike at midnight, but they might come before that hour. Surely, haste ought to be made.

Nevertheless, Yank did not come. Ben had seen him enter the hut, but after that there was no sign. What did it mean? The delay grew painful; the rover's fancy gifted every shadow with life, and saw human forms where none existed. He grew irritable, too; he was tempted to walk to the hut and stir the slow inmates into activity. Why were they so reckless as to waste this valuable time? Did they want the contemplated flight to be foiled by the coming of the enemy?

Suddenly there was a stir at the door of the hut, and two persons came out. Ben looked to see a third follow, but none came. The two advanced. One was unquestionably Yank Yellowbird—who was the other?

Buckingham recognized Zelda.

The mountaineer led the way to where the other men waited and spoke in his usual cheerful manner, though his voice was subdued.

"Hyar we be, as you may diskiver. Dunno but you've got impatient, but the little gal had ter stop an' fix herself up ter look pooty, as feminines will."

Zelda gave her hand frankly to Buckingham.

"I am pleased to see you again, sir," she said.

"Thank you. You see we have met again, after all," he replied, smiling.

"Yes; and this time you are the rescuer. Mr. Yellowbird has not failed to explain your part in the affair."

"Sartain I've explained it," Yank agreed. "I've told all the facts, mebbe some over; so we needn't wait ter say more. Come on!"

"But the other young lady?" asked Ben.

"What young lady?"

"I refer to Miss Templeton, whoever she is."

"Thar ain't no sech individooal thar, an' I didn't think thar was. Didn't s'pose anybody could keep a hotel, an' hev a rush o' boarders, in a seven-by-nine shanty, did ye? I consait not. Them atrocious insex was mistaken; an' I don't b'lieve the name o' Templeton 'pears on the muster-roll o' Big Medicine's poperlation at all. We're all subjeck ter delusions, Blacklock, yer know."

Yank seemed anxious to make his statement plausible, but the rover could not but think that the mountaineer was concealing something. He did not know why there should be a mystery, but if there was one it did not seem to affect him.

He set the example of prompt departure by asking leave to walk beside Zelda, and the party retreated quickly from the village.

Buckingham did not yet know their destination, but he gave the matter no outward attention. Pleased at being again in the company of the girl, he gave all his attention to her.

When well beyond the human habitations they halted; the Modoc glided away, was gone a few minutes, and then returned leading four horses; and then they mounted and rode away. Ben found that he, Yank and Trail-Lifter each had his own horse.

"Lead the way, Modoc," directed Yank. "We're out o' the fu'st pinch all right, an' I reckon we won't hev no egregious adventur' by the way. Ef we do, we must fight it out. Pluck is a good thing ter hev in the fam'ly. 'Member distinctly when Parson Merrick come ter Hot City, which was a monstrous tough town. The parson brung a big book-case an' got Peltiah Peters ter help him nail it to the wall. When they'd driv half a dozen nails Peltiah spoke out, an' sez he: 'Parson, mebbe we'd better not nail this too tight; I think it my duty ter tell ye parsons don't last long in our town.' 'Mister Peters,' sez Merrick, as cool as an iceberg, 'drive in another nail; I've come ter stay!' An' he did stay, until his voice got so weak with age that nobody could hear him back o' the first pew. Pluck is better'n genius, any day, fur it fits inter fair weather an' triberlations alike."

The little party headed directly for the eastern hills, and rode at considerable speed.

Yank was as full of conversation as ever, but he did not see fit to explain where they were going, and Ben asked no questions. The tall mountaineer had taken the lead, and he proposed to allow him full command.

The rover kept beside Zelda.

Nobody disputed his right to ride there, and the girl seemed well satisfied. Yank, after a short time, was content to address his remarks to Trail-Lifter, and the young couple talked on other subjects.

Ben was more than ever inclined to believe Zelda a remarkable girl; he could not forget her Indian blood, and her intelligence and command of language constantly surprised him anew.

All the while they drew nearer to the higher part of the hills, and the rover could not but wonder what was the object of the journey.

Was Zelda going to abandon her home in the village for one among the mountains?

He asked the question of her in an indirect way, but failed to get a conclusive reply. She gave the impression, however, that she was trusting to Yank and did not know where the mountaineer would take her.

Finally the Modoc fell back in the rear.

"Do you fear pursuit, Nevermiss?" Ben asked.

Yank glanced at Zelda.

"We can't always tell," he replied.

"But trailing is impossible in this dark night."

"I wish I's sure on't."

"Surely, no man's gaze can pierce this gloom."

"I've knowed things," replied Yank, punctuating his remarks with his waving forefinger, "that seemed sartain when they was egregious unsartain, that I've knowed them which seemed dubious which was facks as fixed as the heavenly orbs, s'pears an' plants; though, now I think on't, I b'lieve them ain't fixed except at nights. Durin' the day they git leave o' absence, an' very likely Mars calls on Venus fur a social chat—or ter borror a fryin'-pan!"

Just then they reached a stream.

"Hyar's the Serpent River," Yank added.

"Foller me!"

He rode into the shallow bed of the stream and moved northeast.

Buckingham began to take more interest in their journey. The tall veteran was not the man to take all these precautions for nothing; indeed, it was noticeable that the guide's gaze was seldom stationary, but, sweeping from point to point, observed every thing that was to be seen.

"If you would confide in me, Yank, and let me know just what danger you fear, I should probably be of more service in case a crisis arrived," Ben earnestly said, after a short period of meditation.

At this moment a peculiar, mournful sound was borne to their ears by the gentle wind.

Ben started and looked back; he recognized the bay of a bloodhound. Next he glanced at Yank, but, remembering Zelda, said nothing. The latter, however, had not been inattentive.

"Is that what you feared, Nevermiss?" she asked, quietly.

"What?"

"I heard a dog. Is he on our track?"

"A dog on our track! Land o' Goshen! why should a dog foller us?"

"I think I have heard of Sheriff Bunker's bloodhound, and it is now clear why you took to the river. Human pursuers are not the only ones we have to fear."

At that moment the mute Modoc came gallop-

ing along in the shallow water. He checked his horse near the mountaineer, pointed to the rear and beat himself upon the breast.

"To be sure," said Yank, laconically.

"You may as well deal frankly with us all, Mr. Yellowbird," said Zelda, in the same quiet voice.

"Wal, you've guessed it already; the atrocious insex are on our track, an' they hev the bloodhound along, but water leaves no trail, an' no scent. The egregious dog won't be wuth a straw now. Howl away, ye mean varmint; you can't smell us out no more with that long nose o' yourn. I hope ter thunder you'll split yer throat!"

This misfortune was called down upon the hound, which was making a good deal of noise.

"I judge that he has lost the trail," observed Ben.

"He has, an' he's liable to lose his miser'ble life ef he don't look out. Once let me git a chance at him with a knife, an' it's a long good-bye ter his yowlin'."

For several minutes the fugitives moved along in this way, but the roughness of the river-bed did not permit rapid progress. They were drawing nearer to the high hills, but nowhere near as rapidly as the enemy could go on land, if a determined pursuit was being made.

Whether it was no one could say; the bay of the hound had ceased, and there was no way of locating the pursuers.

At last Yank paused and turned his quiet face toward his companions.

"We leave the river hyar," he said, "an' as caution is a mighty good thing, at times, I don't mind sayin' that we'll need it goin' up that rough ground. I consait that the inemy has made a push along hyaraway, an' we may run right inter them. O' course we leave the hosses hyar at the foot o' the hill, but we want ter plant our feet jest whar they won't make a racket. Come on!"

They left the stream at a point where the bank was hard and pebbly; the animals were concealed in a recess in the rocks; and then the ascent of the bluff was begun. Yank led the way; the Modoc was a rear guard; and Buckingham gave aid to Zelda as opportunity allowed.

The rover remained ignorant of their destination, but his faith in the mountaineer was still strong. Whatever of pique he felt at being excluded from the counsel of the case was put aside for the time in his desire to serve Zelda.

Even then he could not help wondering at the strength of his fancy for her. He had had his share of experience on Cupid's field in the past, like all other men, but each and every case had ended so prosaically that he wondered at the interest he felt in the girl.

And she was only a half-breed!

Few words were spoken as they toiled along the rocky acclivity. Yank was absolutely silent; it was a time of danger, and he was beginning to reveal to Buckingham those qualities of warlike valor and prudence which had made him famous.

Suddenly he paused.

"What is it?" Ben anxiously asked.

"Hark!"

The single word passing Yank's lips. The mute Modoc cast himself quickly, but noiselessly on the ground; he placed his ear close to the earth and, for a moment, was like a statue.

Then he quickly arose and, as on a former occasion, beat himself on the breast; his blows now being quick and light.

Yank Yellowbird leaned his rifle against a rock and, taking a few rapid steps away, drew his knife and dropped upon one knee, his gaze intently directed toward a point still ahead of him.

What imminent danger menaced them?

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### BEN DOES NOT UNDERSTAND.

ZELDA's hand trembled as it rested on Buckingham's arm.

"Be calm," he said, "no harm shall be done you."

"But the danger—what is it?"

"I hear quick, light footsteps; I believe it is the dog. Why he don't bay I can't say, unless he is muzzled. Have no fear; I believe Yank Yellowbird will dispose of him alone, and if he does not, Trail-Lifter and I are here."

There was no time for further words; a dark form shot into view, moving straight toward the mountaineer. Yank remained in his place like a rock, and Blacklock Ben did not doubt that his heart was as firm as his form.

The new-comer was the bloodhound.

With an indistinct cry the animal leaped upon the kneeling man, but he had met an iron barrier; there was a brief struggle, the sound of a blow, and Yank arose as quietly as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"The wu'st member o' the gang is gone," he observed. "I s'pose Bob Bunker will miss his bloodhound, but my flesh was never made ter be chewed up. Not much, it wa'n't."

"The weak sister didn't seem to desert you then," replied Ben, hoping to reassure Zelda by giving the matter a less somber coloring.



Yank deliberately raised his left foot and surveyed it critically.

"The weak sister stood by me then, an' there is some hope for it yit. Ef it ever gits so it will stan' up an' do its share o' fightin' like a man, I shall be able ter make an egregious disturbance among the inemy. Wouder whar Bunker an' his ontamed terrors be?"

It was plain that the veteran was not yet at ease. The dog was disposed of, but Yank showed no inclination to advance further up the ridge; instead, his keen gaze swept the rocks and bushes as though he expected to see an enemy start into view at any moment.

Trail-Lifter came to his side, touched his arm, and pointed up the slope.

"All right," responded Yank.

Another moment and the Modoc was gone. His course was up the ledges, but he went without audible sound, his lithe figure moving from rock to rock.

"Am I to be of no use here, Nevermiss?" asked Ben, after a pause.

"You? Land o' Goshen! you've got a pooty gal on yer arm—what more d'ye want? Aspire ter hev some fossilized person 'round ter borry a fryin'-pan, don't ye?" Want ter change yer name ter Canary, mebbe?"

Even in this crisis Yank's mind was harassed by thoughts of Miss Hannah Kitchen, and his unflinching humor could not but put Buckingham in the same mood.

"I yield to your lead," he replied, "but remember that I am not an inexperienced person in border-craft. I don't claim to be a veteran, but I can fight if there is need."

"You may git yer fill on't before we're out o' this egregious pinch. I consait that the inemy hev an idee about whar we be, an' thar is liable ter be trouble."

"All for me!" said Zelda, with a sigh.

"I do not ask to serve in a better cause, or for a more devoted object," replied the rover.

"Sartainly not; all young men feel that way," Yank averred. "Knowned a gal myself once who stirred up my heart most s'prisin'ly. You'd orter see'd the tribulations I rushed inter fur her sake! I shed about all my blood fightin' fur her, an' it's been the cause o' the newrol'gy I hev suffered sence. Newrol'gy an' love is a good 'eal alike, though love has the sharpest pain, an' is proof ag'in' all medicine; even Doctor Todd couldn't b'ile it outer the system when it's in."

Yank paused, started, and looked more keenly up the ridge.

"Mebbe you'd better set down a bit," he suggested.

It was a very matter-of-fact way of saying that there was danger, but they understood and obeyed. Buckingham, too, could now hear a rattling sound on the hillside, as though some moving object was carelessly dislodging stones by the way.

Yank crouched down and waited with his rifle held ready for use. His lank form might have been a rock or bush; it was without perceptible motion.

The sounds on the hillside came nearer, and Ben, looking upward, saw at least two men moving along.

Up to this time the rover had wondered at Zelda's composure, but now she was seized with a shivering which indicated an extreme of fear. He pressed her hand reassuringly.

"Have no fear!" he whispered; "you have friends who will under no circumstances desert you."

"I do not doubt it," she answered, quickly, but her voice was tremulous.

"Yank Yellowbird is a host in himself, and you can rely upon us to save you, let the enemy do what they may."

"You say nothing of yourself, but I am not insensible to your brave devotion to my interests."

It was a remark which pleased the rover, but he made no reply; the prowling men on the higher land had come so near that all his attention was fixed upon them.

He was unable to tell their number, for, owing to the roughness of the ridge, each figure appeared and disappeared irregularly among the rocks.

"The atrocious insex!" muttered Yank. "How easy it would be ter send one on 'em ter Davy Jones. Ef we was as malignant as they be I'd do it, I consait, but nobody ever a'cused Yank Yellowbird o' bein' a butcher yit. When I git ter be sech I'll hev mercy on my pedigree an' change my name ter Canary—yes, by hurley, an' I'll lend my fryin'-pan ter Hannah Kitchen, too!"

The mountaineer's mind would run over his social troubles, whatever else appeared to disturb him.

The prowling men bade fair to pass without any hostile encounter, when suddenly Yank exclaimed:

"Lay low! Hug the 'arth, an' don't breathe ontill I give ye leave!"

The abrupt change in his manner was not to be misunderstood, and as Buckingham listened he distinctly heard one of the enemy on lower ground. This man was moving in direct line with them, and discovery stared them in the face.

The rover spoke reassuringly to Zelda, and then prepared for the encounter which might come. He had but little feeling for these miscreants; he knew them to be the tools of cold-blooded villains, and now that they were engaged in the task of hunting down a helpless woman, they certainly deserved little mercy.

Zelda, if not calm, was certainly very quiet, and not a sound betrayed the presence of the concealed trio.

The prowler came nearer; he was moving slowly along, searching as he went. If this search was thorough, the fugitives could hardly expect to escape discovery.

Still he moved on, and his course was almost toward the little party. Yank Yellowbird, who was nearest the unknown, remained as fixed as the rock beside him; whatever was in his mind, his actions gave no clew.

Nearer came the prowler—so near that the mountaineer might have reached out his long rifle and touched him.

But he saw nothing; the darkness and the rocks defied his imperfect search, and he went on unconscious of the fact that he had been so near to the fugitives—and to danger.

When the sound of his movements had grown faint, Yank quietly arose, and at the same moment Trail-Lifter glided to the spot.

"I consait," observed Yank, "that it is about time we did some climbin'. Cheer up, gal, fur when we've climbed up this ridge a ways we'll be out o' danger. Climbin' over rocks ain't pleasant, but it develops the muskles egregiously."

The mountaineer was without a flurry of excitement; indeed, from the very beginning, his manner had been that of one who expects to overcome whatever obstacles intervene, though it was as quiet and unassuming as ever. No wonder that the tall borderman had made himself a wide reputation.

No more time was lost. Other foes might be near, but the first installment had gone; there might not be another chance so favorable for flight.

The ascent was begun.

"I hope, Nevermiss," said Ben, "that we are near our journey's end."

"To be sure, we are. Don't be overcast."

"You forget that I am working in the dark."

"Not much I don't; can't forgit the fact while the night is so atrocious black. We be in the dark, sure enough."

"I meant figuratively."

"I'm doin' some figgerin' myself," Yank placidly returned, "an' the object on't is ter subtract from our dangers an' add ter our safety."

Good-humored as his evasions were, Ben Buckingham determined to have an understanding before a great while. If he worked for Zelda, it was no more than right that he should know why he worked.

They ascended the ridge; moved a hundred yards; then came to a halt in the shadow of a towering cliff.

"Wait hyar a bit," Yank then said; "I want ter reconnoiter. I like ter know how matters stand."

He departed with quick steps, but Ben, watching, saw him fade away as though he had gone into the face of the solid cliff. Was this the refuge they were seeking? Was a cave to be found at that point? The rover ceased to ask mental questions as Zelda broke the silence. She thanked him warmly for his services in her behalf, and under the charm of her conversation he forgot the passage of time. He could not have told whether five or ten minutes had passed when the mountaineer returned.

He nodded to Zelda.

"We'll excuse ye now fur a few minutes, little woman," he quietly said.

Zelda arose and flitted away, while Yank sat down near Ben. The latter watched until the girl disappeared at the same point where the borderman had seemingly gone into the face of the cliff; then he turned to Yank.

"Nevermiss," he said, gravely, "I want an explanation."

"You do? What of?"

"I have had no light to guide me to-night; you have not confided in me, so I have no idea why our movements have been made. Let me sum up the situation; I overheard a conversation which showed that Zelda and Miss Templeton were menaced by danger; when I told you, it was agreed that we should aid them. We have aided Zelda, but there has been no sign of the Templeton girl, though Bunker averred that she was in the hut. Now we have come to the mountains. Why? What sort of a refuge is yonder? Where is the Templeton girl? What is this secret understanding between you and Zelda? Why does Bunker make war on her and the other girl? Where is the other girl now?"

"Mister," replied Yank, promptly, but in a downcast, hopeless way, "I've heerd o' floods, but never sence my great-cousin, Noah, launched his man-o'-war, the Ark, hev I heerd o' sech a flood as your words make."

"They were plain."

"To be sure, they was; they was egregiously plain, by hurley! I can't help thinkin' that with your gift o' speech you'd orter been a lawyer."

"You evade the point," said Ben, somewhat sternly.

"What p'int?"

"Am I, or am I not, to have light on this matter? I know you to be an honest man, and a shrewd borderer, and I do not doubt your good intentions; but is it right that I should work as I have done, and then he refused all information? Have you so little faith in me that you persist in wrapping this affair in mystery?"

Yank had turned his gaze quickly upon the speaker.

"Land o' Goshen!" he answered, "don't git sech an idee inter yer mind. Doubt ye? Not much, I don't; ef I did, you wouldn't share my hut. Not by a good 'eal!"

"Consoling words, no doubt, but—not the desired explanation."

"I'm sorry ye feel this way, Ben; I be, by hurley! Now look hyar: you an' me have sorter laid down tergether like the lion an' the lamb, so ter speak, an' I want yer good will. You're a man o' eddication an' gen'us. Now can't ye understand that thar may be cases whar it's hard ter s'plain, an' whar you wouldn't ask a statement ef ye knowed all?"

Yank had brought his long fore-finger to bear on the rover, according to his custom when very much in earnest, and was waving it in his most impressive way.

"I don't want no discord ter grow outer this!" he added.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### DANGER IN THE HUT.

"I AM not unmindful of what you say, friend Yank," answered Blacklock Ben, "but I can see only one reason why I should be kept in the dark. If Zelda is menaced by enemies, the arm of every true man counts in her defense. Those who are rejected must necessarily be those who are not trusted."

"Now you wrong me—you do, by hurley!" declared the mountaineer, warmly.

"Prove it!"

"How kin I?"

"There is only one way."

"What's that?"

"Admit me to the secret that undoubtedly exists. It may be that I am disagreeably obstinate, but who likes to work in the dark? If it is the wish of all parties to drop me, I have no more to say; but if I am retained as a friend it is certain that my usefulness depends upon my intimacy with the case. Don't understand me as wishing to pry into other's secrets, but an atmosphere of mystery is not congenial."

"You talk like a lawyer, as I said afore," answered Yank; "an' you'd hev a powerful effeck on a jury. I've heerd, though, that most juries is bought up nowadays, an' him who has the most money wins the case. They call that embracin', though why so I dunno; payin' a man money an' huggin' seem ter me egregiously dif'rent things."

"The word is embracery, not embracing, I believe."

"Same word, only accented dif'rent; thar's a heap in accent, ye know. 'Member distinctly one case in Kansas. The defense an' persecution was both on hand with their money, an' they embraced—I mean embrasured—the jury. Oddly enough, one side bought up six jurymen, an' t'other the same number. Nat'rally, when the jury took a ballot they was tied, an' they couldn't, an' wouldn't, untie. They took up'ards o' a hundred ballots, an' every one was six ter six. Then they voted ter see whether they'd ask ter be discharged or keep it up, an' all twelve was in favor o' keepin' it up."

"They had courage, if not judgment."

"Yas, an' they was arter wealth; ye see, they got paid by the hour, or minute, I forget which; an' each feller had his embracin' money in his pocket. Ef they give up, they'd lose that. So they sent the embracin' money ter a bank, so it would be on interest, an' hung to like hurley. This wus six years ago, an' the last I heerd on 'em they had jest taken the ten-thousandth ballot, an' still stood six ter six, but them who embraced 'em had all died, an' the jedge had gone ter Lapland fur a recess."

Yank had managed to lose sight of the point of discussion, and his manner was so genial that Ben smiled and allowed him to talk on uninterrupted.

An unusual flood of reminiscences had come to the veteran, and he told one after another in his quaint, serious way, all illustrative of the weaknesses of mankind in general and juries in particular.

Buckingham, reclining on the ground, was becoming reconciled to what seemed inevitable.

What right had he, he mentally asked, to demand the confidence of Yank Yellowbird or Zelda? The latter had once plainly, but delicately, informed him that he could not hope to know more about her; his best way was to put her from his mind and attend to his own affairs at Medicine Springs.

These furnished ample employment for him.

He had grown oblivious to what Yank was saying when the latter suddenly arose.

"I'll take a look inside, an' then report," he said.

Ben did not reply, but saw Yank disappear in



the supposed cave with a certain amount of irritation.

"Considering that I am not to be admitted to the place of mystery, they are not very shrewd. What is to hinder me from coming here anon, and thoroughly exploring the unknown retreat. Well, I don't think I shall; once let me get back to Big Medicine and I'll attend to my own affairs, and forget this annoying pretty half-breed."

Ten minutes passed. Ben kept his place, and Trail-Lifter, leaning against a rock, looked off across the plateau with what seemed unseeing eyes. Ben noticed, however, that the repose of his figure was light and elastic, and suspected that the slightest sight or sound of danger would arouse him at once.

The Modoc might be the companion of a white man, but the nature of his race was still strong within him.

The mountaineer returned.

"Wal, Ben, be ye ready ter go?" he carelessly asked.

"Go where?"

"Back ter Big Medicine."

"Is our work wholly done?"

"Yes. Zeldi says she will now say good-by, an' then we can amble back ter town."

"And leave her here?"

"To be sure."

Buckingham shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't a word to say, for you are keeping me in the dark. There may be a cave, yonder, with a hundred Indians inside who will care for our half-breed charge; you ought to know; I don't. If she says we are to go, let us go, by all means."

"Don't feel hurt, frien' Benjamin," Yank earnestly advised; "you ain't so egregiously left in the cold as you think you be. The little woman sends a message ter you, an' though I forgot the exact words on't, the amount is this: She has vitally importunk reasons fur what she's doin'; it would place her in an embarrassin' siteration ter do otherwise; an' ef you'll hev patience, she hopes ter let ye know the hual compleration soon."

"I will accept that message as sufficient, and follow your lead. Do we go now?"

"In a minute. Zeldi is in the door o' the cave. Let us look an' listen."

They advanced a few paces, and then Yank stopped the rover.

"Let's stan' hyar; we kin hear jest as wal as to go closter, an' it would be a waste o' time ter walk furdur."

Ben could not avoid a smile at the veteran's transparent schemes. It was clear that, for some mysterious reason, it was not desired that he should approach Zeldi, and Yank's efforts as a diplomatist lacked all elements of shrewdness. He yielded without a word.

"My kind friends," said the maid of the mountain, "I thank you all very much for your brave devotion to me. I shall not forget it, and, some time, I will see you all again. Good-night!"

She waved her hand and disappeared in the dark recess formed by the cave entrance.

"Come on!" said Yank, hastily. "The night is growin' old an' so be we, an' we may ketch an egregious cold. I want ter git back ter my cabin fur I feel the pulmonary symptoms o' newrol'gy; I s'pose it'll be wrackin' my narvous system ter-morrer like hurley. I once had an attack so severe that it stretched my narves taut, an' a musician who happened along took his fiddle-bow an' used my overtaxed cords fur strings. He got 'Home, Sweet Home' out with melancholy sweetness, but it didn't do the newrol'gy a bit o' good. That's right, Still Tongue; lead the way, an' we'll foller at double quick."

The mountaineer simulated great buoyancy of spirits, and seemed anxious to prevent questioning, but Ben had no thought of reopening the subject.

Zeldi's farewell had added to the mystery of the case, but he was determined to let it rest. If she and Yank had a secret so had he, and the less he thought of other matters while at Medicine Springs, the better.

They descended the mountain, recovered their horses and rode back to the village. In due time they were in Yank's hut, which was found as they left it.

In a few minutes they were rolled up in their blankets and prepared to pass the rest of the night in slumber. They were not pampered children of civilization and society who had to woo slumber, either, and in a short time all were unconscious of the real world and existing in the land of dreams.

It has been said that Yank Yellowbird was not the man to sleep when unusual things were occurring around him. He was a peaceful, but light, sleeper, and a score of years of danger among red-men and white had taught him habitual caution.

Even when he was asleep he was on the alert. On this occasion he had not slept over an hour when he awoke. He opened his eyes and looked around; all was silent.

This seemed natural and peaceful, but Yank was impressed with the idea that he had been awakened by something unusual. What was it?

Without making a betraying movement he listened. His patience was rewarded; there was a slight sound at the entrance to the hut.

If he had been attentive before he now became keenly alert. He had heard similar sounds before. The stealthy creeping of a man along the ground might have made a noise like it; that slow, shuffling sound had often heralded in his experience the coming of an enemy to his night camp-fire, or to his hut erected for the time in a wilder place than Medicine Springs.

It was hardly to be expected in the town.

Yank never lay down without his weapons beside him, and his hand now strayed to them.

He did not wish to alarm the prowler yet; he was anxious to know who he was and what he wanted; but the mountaineer had no intention of being taken at a disadvantage.

The creeping sound continued, and Yank's gaze, turned toward the entrance, detected a dark figure there. It was already inside the hut. What was intended—robbery or worse?

The unknown moved on, and Yank speedily discovered that his course was, by design or accident, directly toward Buckingham. The narrow limits of the hut did not admit of a long journey; the intruder was soon beside the sleeping rover.

Ben was unconscious of danger, but he was rudely aroused. Something broke the chain of slumber; he awoke with the vague idea that something was wrong; he sprung to his feet with his rifle grasped ready for use.

"A light, hyar; a light!" a well-known voice was saying. "Show a bleeze, Modoc, an' let me see what sort o' an atrocious insex I've ketched!"

Trail-Lifter had been ahead of the order. Springing to the banked-up fire he kicked it open and caught up a half-consumed brand for a torch. The fire, too, flashed up brightly, and Buckingham had a view of an interesting tableau.

A man who did not belong there lay flat on his back, with Yank Yellowbird composedly sitting astride of him, holding the knife he had wrested from the assassin's hand.

The intruder was Abe Rooks!

## CHAPTER XVII.

### LANGLEIGH INVESTIGATES.

SHERIFF BUNKER's assistant was evidently not in a happy frame of mind. He had been roughly handled, and his naturally stubborn hair now looked more disheveled than ever; while the resistless strength opposed to him, coupled with his sudden downfall, so alarmed him that his small, evil eyes had a wild gleam.

If he was dismayed, Yank was not; the veteran had never been more at ease. He cast down the knife and looked benignly at his prisoner; then, releasing one hand, calmly stroked his beard and said:

"Good-evenin', neighbor! How be ye feelin' this evenin'?"

Rooks could find no words with which to reply to this unexpected greeting.

"Ruther late ter make a call," I consait," serenely continued Yank, "but you ain't the less welcome. I'm a sociable, frien'ly man onless I'm afflicted with the egregious newrol'gy. Fine weather we're havin', ain't it, Mister Rooks?"

The captive muttered some indistinct speech which did not sound very friendly.

"Can't imagine what you've come fur, by hurley!" added Yank; then, suddenly raising his gaze to Buckingham, he shook his fore-finger at that individual and gravely observed: "It wouldn't s'prise me a bit ef he's come ter borry our fryin'-pan!"

Rooks managed to find his voice.

"Let me up, curse ye!" he shouted.

"Speak a leetle louder, mister. We are rather deaf in our ears, an' whispers ain't audible ter the naked eye."

"I'll have your life ef ye don't let me up!" declared Rooks, angrily.

"Not much you won't! I wouldn't give ye charge o' my life nohow, fur I know you would misuse it. I ain't got no egregious amount o' faith in you, Abe Rooks. I tell ye that plain, fur I'm settin' on ye like a coroner."

"What has the scoundrel tried to do?" asked Ben.

"Nothin', except ter kill *you*."

"I didn't do nothin' o' the kind!" growled Abe.

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Still Tongue, give me that weepin'!"

The long, ugly-looking knife had been lying on the edge of Ben's blanket. The Modoc picked it up promptly, and Yank, taking it, made a motion as though to drive it into Rook's body. The ruffian yelled with fear.

"Land o' Goshen! what's the matter?" asked Yank, with his most innocent air.

"Would ye murder me?"

"So that is what ye call it? I'm glad I know. That was jest the trick you's about to play on Blacklock Ben, ye atrocious insex! So ye call it *murder*, do ye?"

"I wa'n't goin' ter strike him."

"Ye wa'n't, was ye? Then why did ye hev the knife over him?"

"I didn't!" asserted Abe, relying on the darkness to conceal the truth. "I didn't hev no knife; I never seen it afore."

"Benjamin, may I ax you ter read the epitaph scratched on the handle o' this carvin'-knife?" Yank quietly asked.

"Here is the scoundrel's own name—'A. Rooks!'" said Buckingham, sternly. "His guilt is proven."

"To be sure it is. Don't ye go ter lyin' any more, critter. You might as wal swear that this hut is a palace; it won't work. I like ter see a man cave when he's down, an' you're down, by hurley! Comfort'ble seat I've hyar; how do you enjoy it?"

Yank raised himself a few inches, and then suddenly dropped upon Abe's stomach, causing that person to utter a subdued bellow.

"I have a word to say to you," added the rover. "You have tried to kill me. Why?"

"I didn't do—"

"Who sent you?"

"I made a mistake; I thought this war another shanty."

"Don't ye b'lieve the atrocious insex, Benjamin," advised Yank. "He's been hyar afore; he had the lay o' the land all spied out, an' he made fur your bunk as nat'ral as a cat would go fur milk."

"Of course I don't believe him, but I do think he was only the tool of others. He can save himself a good deal of trouble by confessing who set him on."

"Mebbe a little jussional chastizement would do him good. I don't know o' nothin' else so infloential with the moral faculties as a mighty good thrashin'. That's what you need, neighbor, by hurley!"

Yank shook his finger in Rooks's face, but the fellow did not seem to hold the same opinion. He began to storm, but suddenly ceased when the mountaineer reached over and pulled the ramrod from his rifle. Quiet as Yank was, Rooks was afraid of him.

"Ef the concert is over," said the veteran, "mebbe you would like to cross-question him, Benjamin?"

"No," Buckingham promptly replied. "I want nothing to do with him; I can see that he has obstinacy enough to persist in his lies, especially as confession might put his precious neck in jeopardy. The sooner you kick him out the door, the sooner the air of this cabin will be purified."

"I consait that you're right on that score, but it seems a pity ter see the varmint go clear arter all this ceremony. I've set on him like a corner, an' it's contrary ter all preserdent ter let a man go when he's b'en set on. I know that from experience. I was once blowed up in a 'splosion down in St. Louis, an' remained insenseless fur two days. When I come to, the coroner was settin' on me, an' jest goin' ter sign his name ter a paper."

"Take the corpus an' this burial permit," sez he, ter an assistant, "an' bury 'em both right away."

"Hold on," sez I; "I object."

"Why d'ye object?" sez he.

"'Cause I'm alive, by hurley," sez I.

"That's your fault an' not mine," sez he, dippin' his pen in the ink ag'in, ter sign the burial permit.

"I won't be buried alive," I yelled, in consternation; "it won't agree with me, an' I know it. The grave will give me an egregious a'tack o' newrol'gy."

"We'll make it warm," sez he.

"I'll make it warm fur *you*," sez I, "if you don't let me out. I ain't dead, an' I won't be buried. Open the door an' let me out o' yer atrocious channel-house, or I'll smash all the furniture, by hurley!"

"Young man," sez he, severely, "you've b'en duly sot on an' pronounced dead, an' you've got ter be buried. It is egregious bad taste in you ter behave so; yer conduct is re'lly reprehensible. Behave like a gentleman now; show yer bringin' up, an' don't disgrace yer parients!"

"This illusion to my parients stirred me to the quick, fur all the Yellowbirds is proud o' their pedigree."

"I'll show my bringin' up," sez I, an' with that I brung up my knees and sent him flyin' off'n me.

"I slid outer the door like a jack-rabbit, an' never stopped runnin' until St. Louis was forty mile distant. I've sence heerd that the h'ist I give the coroner sent him up ag'in' the ceilin', an' he actooally was so confused that he signed his name thar, mistakin' it fur the burial permit."

Having finished this reminiscence, Yank deliberately arose, and, pointing to the door with one hand, mildly added:

"Ef I's you, Mister Abe Rooks, I'd slide."

The fellow needed no second bidding; he scrambled to his feet, and went without a word. At the door, he paused and looked back. The impulse to go with an air of bravado was strong, but after another look at Yank, he changed his mind, and went in silence.

He made no stop until he reached the rear of the Hygeia Hotel, where Sheriff Bunker was awaiting him.

"What luck?" the latter eagerly asked.



Abe's first remarks were too confused and violent for record, for to his failure had been added the "indignity" of being sat upon as though he had been a school-boy, but out of it all Bunker managed to gather the truth.

"Foiled!" he muttered, irritably.

"I'll git at him ag'in!" declared Rooks, ferociously. "I won't b'ar no sech insult. I'll fix him, an' I'll fix that homely scoundrel, Yank Yellowbird."

"You'd better let Yellowbird alone."

"Why?"

"They call him 'The Hustler from Hard-scrabble,' an' the Injuns hev named him 'Never-miss.' No common man is thus honored. The critter is a bad 'un, an' you'd better go slow. Pay all yer attention ter Buckingham."

"I'm arter both!" alleged Rooks, his hand nervously seeking the place where his knife usually was, "but I'll take Buckingham first. Count him the same as dead!"

The following morning Nelson Langleigh called his daughter into his room as she was passing the door. There had never been any great amount of sympathy between them, for his cold nature made such a thing out of the question; but Imogene possessed a remarkably well-balanced nature, and she moved on her way with a serene dignity which was proof against all trifles.

There had been outward peace between them, and neither cared for more.

"Pray be seated, Imogene," said Langleigh, blandly. "I wished to ask you a question. Have you seen your friend, Mr. Buckingham, lately?"

He asked the question with his gaze fixed full upon her face, and with the expectation that consternation would follow it. Imogene had secretly met the man he mentioned, and if what he suspected was true, it seemed probable that the color would rush from her face; at least she would be confused and startled.

Nothing resulted as he expected; Imogene's gaze still met his own, and except for some slight surprise she had never been calmer.

"I do not know any such person," she answered.

"Don't know Buckingham?"

"No, sir."

"Do you mean to say that you never saw him?"

"I do not mean to say so. You asked me if I was acquainted with him, or words to that effect. I am not. Now that you mention it, I think—though I am not sure—that I met the gentleman the other day and paused to answer some questions he asked about the place."

"Practically the same thing."

"Excuse me; you called him my friend."

"We won't quarrel as to this. Pray, who is this young Buckingham?"

"Really, I don't know; I saw him but once, and then only for a moment. How should I know who he is?"

Imogene was certainly taking chances, but she did not believe that Langleigh could be aware of her interview with Ben Buckingham at Hannah Kitchen's house.

"I have been told that your interview with the person was of a loving nature."

Langleigh had descended to a lie, but he was annoyed by Imogene's unmoved manner, and determined to force matters to a crisis; he felt sure that there was a great secret hidden in the girl's mind, and was anxious to conquer her.

Imogene's expression became indignant.

"If any one told you so, it is a mean falsehood!" she declared, firmly.

"All accounts seem to agree that you and Buckingham are intimate," he continued.

"That indicates a number of accusers," returned Miss Langleigh, in a straightforward way. "Who are they?"

"I prefer not to say."

"And I, sir, demand their names. I have been falsely accused, and I propose to face my libelers and force them to retract. Who are they?"

She had grown imperious, and Nelson Langleigh moved uneasily in his chair. He had aroused a storm, and, to speak the truth, he felt somewhat afraid of this indignant girl.

"Nonsense!" he said, lightly; "let it pass. It is nothing."

"It is something to me."

"But nothing has been said derogatory to you. Of course there was no harm in your meeting Buckingham, but I asked about it merely with fatherly interest."

"Yet," retorted Imogene, your 'fatherly interest' is not strong enough so that you resent an insult to your daughter. I want to know who told you that my casual meeting with the stranger was 'of a loving nature.' It is my right to know, and I demand the information!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

JOHN KIRK.

IMOGENE stood very erect and firm before her father, and her air was more queenly than ever, but Langleigh did not appreciate her demeanor in the least. He had thought to overwhelm

her; to obtain proofs of what he suspected in her confusion; but everything had worked wrong, and he wished he had said nothing.

He could see only one way out of the difficulty, and he forced a laugh.

"Nonsense, Imogene!" he said. "Can't you see that I was only indulging in a joke?"

"If that is so, it is a poor one."

"Possibly, but I would not have done it in the presence of others."

"Then you admit that all you have said is false?"

"Since you will put it so bluntly, I do," Langleigh irritably replied; "at least, I only know that you were in conversation with Buckingham."

"I told you how that came about; it was by chance."

"Ye-es," he slowly admitted. "Well, what did you think of Buckingham?"

"Really, I gave him no thought," calmly replied Imogene.

"I am of the opinion that he is a knave."

"It is immaterial to me whether he is or not."

"Well, overlook my little jest, and now—I will attend to my letters."

She accepted her dismissal without apparent regret, and left the room with her usual queenly way. Langleigh looked after her with a scowl upon his face.

"Beaten, by Jupiter!" he muttered, "and by a woman. I never met one of the sex before who did not make glittering generalities take the place of logic, but Imogene is too confounded practical. There was no getting around her direct attacks, and she goes away the victor."

He paused, moved impatiently, and then continued:

"This don't change the facts of the case, however; she has courage and nerve enough to face me boldly, but it remains a fact that she has been in conversation with young Buckingham. If he is Dick Mainwaring, the Secret Service Sleuth, and there isn't much doubt of it—Bunker is sure he is Mainwaring—his coming to Medicine Springs is a deadly menace to me, and the meeting of those two—Well, if they know the truth, the dickens will be to pay!"

Langleigh arose and paced the room with quick, nervous strides.

It seemed very strange to see one of his cold, even temperament excited and worried, but he had good reason for his present mood.

"Do they suspect the truth?"

He muttered the words apprehensively, and then quickly gave the answer:

"They must—ay, they must! Chance did not bring Buckingham to this town; they know all, and I am in deadly peril!"

Back and forth again with his restless stride, and then his face grew more ominous of expression and he added:

"He must die! I will accept no more of Bunker's weak excuses; he certainly has followers enough to dispose of one man, and it must be done. Buckingham must die!"

A period of meditation followed, and then he suddenly aroused and prepared for the street. He went out, but the former pleasure he had taken in surveying a town which owed its being to him was no longer his. He felt himself a hunted man; he looked apprehensively about as he walked, expecting every moment to see Buckingham confront him.

The coming of the rover to Cutwater Gap had made a great change in the rich man's existence.

Trying to banish his gloomy thoughts, Langleigh made his way to "The Hydropathic Bathing Establishment." He found John Kirk busy with the patients, giving a cheerful word to each, and then sending him to a private room with an attendant.

Nearest to Langleigh was a stout man who was arguing with the attendant who had charge of him—Agrippa Ames.

"This is my seventh day here," said the patient, in a loud voice, "and not an atom of improvement can I see in my condition."

"But it t-t-takes t-time," urged Ames, who had an impediment in his speech.

"Now I think you have it; time will cure any complaint. Time and Death mean the same thing. But, hang it, man, I didn't come here to be doctored by time; it was to get cured by the spring-water."

"I f-f-feel sure it is d-d-doing its work, sir," said Ames, mildly.

"So is time," retorted the patient. "I dare say that if I keep on bathing here, and paying out solid money, I shall feel about cured by the time I die. Demme, sir, if I find that these springs are a humbug, I'll make it hot for the time. I am not a man to be swindled, sir! My name, sir, is D. Webster Goss, and I am from Chicago, sir!"

If he expected this ponderous announcement to crush Agrippa Ames he was mistaken.

"We will s-s-send you home c-cured, sir," said Ames.

"Do so, and I'll make your fortune, begad! You are a decent fellow, my man, and I rather like you. I venture to observe that I am somebody in Chicago, sir. I am a politician, and I have the city under my thumb—at least, I did, until this infernal ague shook my thumb off of it, and nearly shook me out of my boots."

"That was b-bad, sir," sympathizingly answered the attendant.

"Bad! Well, rather! I am a politician and a diplomatist, Ames, and when I put my shoulder to the wheel the cart moves, begad! I could shake all Chicago, and shake office-seekers, and useless friends, and whisky when I wasn't thirsty, but I'll be hanged if I can shake this ague. It shakes me—the ague does!"

"The spring w-w-water will soon shake the ague," consolingly replied Ames. "Will you go in your room now, sir?"

"I will. I want to test this alleged medicinal water well—but if it proves a humbug, I'll ventilate it, sir!"

The couple disappeared in a private room, and John Kirk approached Langleigh with an amused smile.

"One of our chronic grumblers, sir," he observed.

"I should say so. Are there many like him?"

"Well, yes; there is more or less grumbling, but a little skillful management serves to restore their good-humor."

"That attendant knows his business. What's his name?"

"Agrippa Ames. He is a good man, for he is very patient and consoling."

"Use him well; increase his pay, if you think best. I like him. Ah! here comes Todd!"

The doctor was approaching, but before he could reach them two men pounced upon him; one of whom was ponderously fleshy, and the other unnaturally emaciated.

"Doctor Todd, stop!" commanded the lean man. "I am Roderic Ray, of Vicksburg, and one of your patients. This is Mr. C. C. Blythe. We find, sir, that we are here and paying enormous charges for using the spring-water. You claim that you can make me fat, and you tell Blythe that you can reduce his weight. Your mode of treatment is the same in each case—spring-water. Now, sir, what we want to know is how this water will add to my weight, and reduce Blythe's. It is confounded queer!"

"Very confounded queer!" added Blythe, in a wheezy voice.

Todd smiled in his blandest manner.

"It is very simple, gentlemen," he replied.

"We don't see it that way!" declared Roy.

"We can't see it that way!" asserted Blythe.

"Very simple, gentlemen—very simple," blandly answered Mr. Todd. "Mr. Blythe, do you use my vapor inhaler regularly every night?"

"I do; and a villainous dose it is. If it don't give me the asthma, it'll be a wonder."

"It will not, Mr. Blythe, but, combined with the bath, it will reduce your flesh surprisingly after a short time."

"Would it make me grow fat?" sarcastically demanded Roderic Ray.

"You, sir, are under different treatment," benignly explained Todd. "The medicine I give you is a concentrated, nearly full-proof extract of *kar-ish-ko-ah*. This wonderful herb, gathered for us in Africa, on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, is sent to us direct from our foreign depot at Ujiji. It is a wonderful Esculapian article, its office being to build up the human system and accumulate hard, healthy flesh. That is what we are doing for you, Mr. Ray. There is, as you see, a vast difference in my treatment of you two gentlemen."

Mildly, plausibly, seductively the doctor made this statement, his face beaming like the rising sun, and the irresistible logic of what he said completely conquered the complainers.

They looked ashamed of their hasty words, and began to smooth them over.

Business called Kirk to another part of the building, and he heard no more of the conversation. Such scenes were common at "The Hydropathic Bathing Establishment;" there was daily fault-finding, and though Todd's smooth tongue often quieted the rising storm, there were many who left Medicine Springs vowing that the whole thing was a humbug, and a deliberate swindle on the part of Langleigh and Todd.

Kirk often had serious doubts—he did not like to be connected with swindlers or bogus institutions. But when his doubts became strong some patient would be discharged pronouncing himself cured, and ascribing all benefit to the water.

Despite this, there were so many dissatisfied patients that he could not but doubt, and only one thing kept him in his present situation.

He had seen Imogene Langleigh; he admired her.

He remained at "Big Medicine" to be near her.

Up to the time when he had the pleasure of rescuing her—and beating Cecil Montclair so neatly—he had never been presumptuous enough to declare himself; but that incident was the means of precipitating important events, as will presently be seen.

Kirk labored as usual through the day, and did not slight the least detail of his work, but his assistants, looking at his composed face, did not suspect what was in his mind.

Six o'clock saw him at liberty, and he then went directly home. It may be mentioned to his credit, considering what followed, that he ate supper with his usual relish, and showed no trace of excitement.



After supper, he called at the humble home of Miss Hannah Kitchen. It was noticeable that Miss Kitchen was becoming a person of prominence, considering that she was only "a lone woman," as she expressed it. Originally noted only for her skill in laundry work, she was now a leading feature in three things. The first of these was the secret meeting of Imogene and Blacklock Ben at her house; the second was her attempt to borrow a frying-pan of Yank Yellowbird; and now John Kirk was making a call on her.

That John had been fascinated by her charms does not appear—possibly he wanted a quiet place to pass an hour or so. Miss Kitchen's house was a quiet place. True, when Julian Morincy, the young telegraph operator, came to town he had engaged room and board with her, but he had gone away again to await the completion of the telegraph line.

Kirk's visit was not a long one. He soon came out and returned to his own boarding-house.

At this place he remained until midnight; then he left the house in a secret way and passed to the other side of the village. He paused near Nelson Langleigh's house, fixed his attention thereupon, and proceeded to wait with ill-concealed impatience.

Ten minutes passed; then a female figure came silently out of the house and joined him.

It was Imogene!

Their meeting was lover-like, but brief. Almost without delay they moved quickly away, and began a secret circle of the limits of the village—a journey which ultimately brought them to the door of Hannah Kitchen's house.

The mystery deepened; what was to be the next act in the drama?

## CHAPTER XIX.

### ONE TOO MANY IN THE SECRET.

Kirk knocked at the door in a peculiar way; it was promptly opened by Hannah Kitchen; and then the young couple passed inside and the hostess locked the door behind them.

They were then ushered into the best room of which the house could boast, and given chairs.

"Hasn't Mr. Brainard come?" John anxiously asked.

"Oh! yes; he is in the other room, an' eatin' a light supper I set out for him. He'll be here soon. You're lookin' sweet, Miss Langleigh!"

Imogene smiled slightly, but did not reply. Her expression had been thoughtful and grave, and it was plain that matters of importance occupied her mind.

"Such occasions," continued Miss Kitchen, "are fraught with tender interest; they stir one's inner being as the tumultuous cyclone sways the timid mountain trees. I can feel for a sister-woman!"

The speaker pressed both hands over her heart and sighed deeply.

"Matrimony," she added, "is a serious step to take, but what woman would not willin'ly be a hero an' dare all!"

"We expect that you will be the next in order, Miss Kitchen," observed John, with a grave smile.

The lady at once became confused.

"Mr. Kirk, what have you heard?" she asked, with evident agitation.

"What have I heard?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Are there—that is, can it be there are any rumors flying about me?"

The slightest possible trace of amusement appeared in Kirk's eyes as he comprehended, at last.

"Nothing definite, Miss Kitchen, but there are rumors about us all."

Hannah showed more confusion than ever, but managed to rally.

"Let us change the subject," she said. "Miss Imogene, I congratulate you from the depths of my inner being, but, really, don't you think Langleigh is a more romantic name than Kirk?"

Imogene, being well aware of Miss Kitchen's fancy for romance, made a suitable reply, and then the elder lady seemed to be struggling with some other matter of importance. It finally found vent in words:

"Do you think, Miss Imogene, that Canary is a romantic name?"

"Decidedly so," was the reply, though Imogene was so little interested that she even failed to wonder what the question meant.

Miss Kitchen once more placed her hands over her heart, as though her "inner being" was again agitated.

"She is very grave," the maiden lady thought; "the dear child has certainly heard the rumors of which Mr. Kirk spoke. I think sure that Mr. Yellowbird understood about the fryin'-pan, an' has mentioned his intentions. I only hope he is willin' to change his name to Canary!"

Wholly unconscious of her meditations, Imogene and Kirk devoted their thoughts to their own affairs. Before they left the house it was expected that the girl would be John Kirk's wife. This would be a great step forward from the state of affairs the day when Miss Langleigh's horse ran away.

Circumstances had necessitated haste.

John had seen the girl and proposed just after the runaway, and the secret wedding had been the outgrowth of what she then told him.

Cecil Montclair had been annoying her with attentions, and Langleigh had the same as ordered her to receive them encouragingly and, in due time, become the wife of the hotel-keeper.

Imogene said little, but all her nature rebelled. She loved Kirk; she disliked and feared Montclair. The lesson of obedience to parental authority had almost been an unknown thing in her life; if ever presented to her, it had been sternly. She did not remember her mother, and Nelson Langleigh had never ruled her by the power of love.

She had grown to maturity like one isolated from her fellow-creatures. Deprived of parental love; deprived of a sympathizing friend to whom she could confide—what wonder that she had grown to womanhood with the firm conviction that, to her, her own interests were paramount to all else?

"There is one way by which you can escape Montclair's persecution," said John Kirk, when she confided in him. "Marry me, and you can defy him."

"At once?" she had asked.

It was a more headlong step than his cautious nature would have thought best, but what else could he say with the eyes of the woman he loved looking into his own?

"At once!" he replied.

"It is best so," added Imogene.

She had asked that it be a secret marriage. Here, again, his conservative nature was in silent opposition, but he urged, rather than opposed, the step. Imogene had said that she had reasons for secrecy which she could only reveal later. He hardly gave a thought to this; he believed it only one of those little mysteries all women like to weave about trivial matters.

For once, at least, his perspicacity failed him; Imogene had a reason—a secret—which might astonish him—if nothing worse—when he heard it.

And on this evening they were about to take that irrevocable step which would direct their future destiny.

Miss Kitchen evidently knew about what the extent of a clergyman's appetite was, and, remarking that Mr. Brainard had probably finished supper, she went to the next room. She almost immediately returned accompanied by the reverend gentleman and one Alfred Mason, a friend of Kirk's, and he who was to be a witness with Miss Kitchen of the ceremony.

Mr. Brainard preached at Red Rock, and, being little acquainted at Medicine Springs, had no reason to know that this marriage was to be a secret one.

He was a large, jovial man; one no one would ever have taken for a minister by his appearance; and he now felt called upon to make a few good-humored remarks before doing his work.

John and Imogene merely tolerated these remarks, but Miss Kitchen observed to Mr. Mason that it was very affecting; and as she recollected that this same clergyman might some time unite her and Yank Yellowbird for life, her inner being became turbulent again and she had to press her hands over her heart.

The ceremony began.

Imogene was outwardly calm, but her mind was in confusion. Some day she would be obliged to tell John Kirk the secret of her life. How would it be received?

For one moment she faltered, and Kirk looking into her eyes, saw a startled expression there. He thought it natural, and it was quickly gone.

Mr. Brainard neared the close of the ceremony, and his voice rung out sonorously.

"I pronounce you man and wife," he said, and, just then, a slight sound at one side caused him to turn.

An uninvited witness met his gaze.

The parlor door had been opened, and on the threshold stood a person who looked in wonder at the scene.

It was Julian Morincy, the French telegraph operator!

Imogene gave a faint cry, and matters came to a standstill. Every one of the original party except the minister understood that this interruption was untimely, to say the least, and that danger was henceforth to be expected—perhaps trouble.

The bride gazed at Morincy in silent consternation. She had seen him once before; she knew him to be her father's employee.

It was a most unfortunate interruption.

On his own part, Morincy quickly recovered his self-possession and bowed politely.

"I beg pardon," he said, with his slight French accent. "I did not intend to intrude; I was not aware that any one was here. Had I known I should not have wished to—interrupt such an agreeable event!"

And he bowed again very blandly.

"Land sakes alive!" ejaculated Miss Kitchen, "how did you git in here?"

"With the key you gave me, to be sure. I have just returned from Red Rock, and came

here at once. I believe I engaged lodgings of you!"

"Oh! certain, certain! I don't dispute that, but you come rather—a little outimely."

"Believe me," returned the young Frenchman, "I am sorry to have interrupted, but I never thought of a wedding here. I will at once withdraw to my room, only pausing to wish joy to the happy pair."

Very polite and bland was his manner, but as his gaze wandered to Imogene, she felt that it was more than a casual survey; there was in it something secret, and, she really thought, threatening, and a shiver passed over her.

Morincy was about to withdraw, but John Kirk, whose forehead had been contracted in a troubled frown, now addressed him:

"Excuse me, Mr. Morincy, but will you return here at the end of ten or fifteen minutes?"

"If you wish, monsieur."

"Such is my wish."

"Then I will return."

He bowed deeply and withdrew, leaving the principal parties to the ceremony in a bewildered and startled frame of mind.

"This is very unfortunate!" said Kirk, gravely.

"He will betray us!" exclaimed Imogene. "He is my father's employee, and he will tell him all."

"This must be prevented," John firmly said. "I will talk with this Frenchman, and if he is a decent man, I may be able to pledge him to silence."

"He looked at me in a way which made me shiver," asserted Imogene, nervously.

"It may have been chance—curiosity."

"I feel that it was more, and I argue the worst from this interruption. Something tells me that man is treacherous; that he is not one to be trusted."

"Really, my friends, I do not understand this at all," said the minister. "Is this a secret marriage?"

They explained all to him then, as John had intended to do anyway after the ceremony. If the idea of a secret union troubled Brainard, he did not say so; he treated the matter in his usual light-hearted way, and promised to do his share toward keeping the matter quiet. It was too late to retract, anyway, and when, somewhat later, Julian Morincy was heard coming down the stairs, Imogene had her certificate duly filled out, and was as irrevocably John Kirk's wife as though the ceremony had been performed in the grandest church of the country.

Morincy knocked ceremoniously; was admitted by Miss Kitchen; and came in smiling in a friendly way.

"Just a few moments with you," he said, pleasantly. "I am weary after my ride from Red Rock; besides, I am myself a confirmed bachelor."

Mr. Brainard smiled grimly at the idea of a confirmed bachelor whose first mustache was still a feeble pioneer, but Morincy's gaze wandered to the bride again, and once more she shivered.

"I take it that you know me, Morincy," said John, bluffly.

"Yes, monsieur; I do."

"We both serve Nelson Langleigh."

"True, Mr. Kirk."

"Do you also know this lady?"

The Frenchman bowed even lower than usual.

"I have seen her before—only that. She is Miss Langleigh; at least, that was her name a short time ago."

The idea seemed to amuse him, and he smiled more than ever, but Imogene felt her suspicions increase.

"There is something secret and hidden back of this," she thought, with a sinking heart. "Julian Morincy is a man to be feared!"

## CHAPTER XX.

### A TRAP FOR BUCKINGHAM.

John Kirk steadily pursued the subject of conversation.

"Do you understand the full meaning of what you have seen here to-night?" he asked.

"It appears to be a secret marriage," Morincy answered, quietly.

"That is just what it is."

"Such things are common, monsieur."

"Having been secretly consummated, we are anxious to keep it secret," Kirk continued.

"Naturally."

"You have, by accident, become a party to the secret. May I ask you what you think your duty in the case? If you will keep our secret you will win our undying gratitude. Will that weigh as heavily with you as the fact that Nelson Langleigh is your employer?"

Morincy smiled quietly.

"Mr. Langleigh," he answered, "engaged me to act as a telegrapher, not to take part in his private affairs."

"Am I to understand from that, that you agree to keep our secret?"

"Exactly. I am no spy for anybody, monsieur, and I regard myself bound to Mr. Langleigh only by the terms of our contract. I



am to look after the telegraph office he must look after his house and family."

Kirk warmly grasped the speaker's hand.

"My dear fellow," said he, "you speak like a man, and if you carry out this resolution you may henceforth regard me as your friend. If, at any time, I can help you, don't fail to come to me; I will give you my aid gladly!"

"Thanks; perhaps I shall avail myself of the chance."

"Imogene!"

John turned to his bride, and she, understanding the call, went forward and gave her hand to Morincy.

"If you will protect our secret, you will gain my undying gratitude," she said.

"I will be silent."

Julian spoke tersely, almost curtly, it seemed; and the contact of their hands was brief and without warmth. Somehow, Imogene could not do her part to make it otherwise; the aversion she had taken to the telegrapher did not die away, and her faith in him was feeble, indeed.

"As I said before, I am a good deal wearied after my journey," Morincy then observed, "so I will bid you all good-night and retire to my room. Have no uneasiness, Mr. Kirk, in regard to me; I will keep your secret well."

And then the Frenchman bowed himself out with great politeness and ascended to his room.

He did not leave the newly-married couple in the best of spirits; there was one more in their secret than they had desired, and that one an utter stranger. They had his promise of secrecy, but would it be kept?

A good deal depended on how Julian Morincy conducted himself at Medicine Springs—from that time he, who had seemed wholly outside the drama, became an important factor therein.

What would be the result?

The remainder of the party soon broke up. Brainard left to return to Red Rock; Mason returned home; and John and Imogene started for Langleigh's.

Their conversation on the way was earnest, and they had much to say. For weal or woe, the step was taken, and each day of the future would be fraught with anxiety to them. This was the most cheerful view of the case, and to this was now added the doubt which would hover over the telegraph operator.

Would Morincy keep his promise?

Kirk tried to make Imogene take a cheerful view of the case, and she as earnestly tried to dispel her misgivings and vague fears.

They parted at her father's door; Kirk returned home, and the bride entered the house. It was some time before she thought of retiring. Instead, she paced the room in a deeply thoughtful mood.

"The step is taken, and by it my future will be molded. What will be the result? Some day I must tell John my secret—then what will he say? I don't know, for I am, as yet, ignorant of what I shall have to tell. And this Julian Morincy! What of him? It was most unfortunate that he became a party to our secret. I fear that man; there is something about him which I do not understand, and our secret will never be safe while he shares it."

Her mood was not a happy one for a bride, nor was her rest peaceful that night, but in the morning she looked as calm and as much at ease as ever.

Langleigh was not in a talkative mood, and beyond a few eulogistic remarks concerning Cecil Montclair—spoken in a way which he tried to make seem casual—he had but little to say.

After breakfast Langleigh walked over to the telegraph office. Before noon they expected to send the first message to Red Rock. Morincy was already on hand, and the workmen were finishing their duty.

Sheriff Bunker came in, and Langleigh took him to one side, and asked:

"Have you news for me?"

"No."

"Do you mean to say that you have not looked after Buckingham yet?" sharply demanded Langleigh.

"Not so loud, boss; hear me afore you find fault. I've tried ter 'do' fur him; I sent Abe Rooks thar ter finish ther feller off."

"Didn't he find Buckingham?"

"Wal, ef he didn't, Buckingham found him. Yes, Rooks found him, but they diskivered him, an' give Abe a rough welcome, you bet!"

"They? Whom do you mean?"

"Blacklock Ben an' Yank Yellowbird."

"So that lank meddler was in it?"

"Ranther. He laid Rooks on his back an' set on him fur half an hour."

"Mr. Yank Yellowbird will get himself into trouble if he don't look out. Fact is, I think this town needs a general clearing-out. A good many persons have drifted here whom we don't want about; in fact, we won't have them. First thing we know, an' adverse element will spring up and upset our hold here. Do you know, Bunker, and here Langleigh lowered his voice and glanced cautiously around to see that no one was near, "I dreamed of that Templeton girl last night."

The sheriff started.

"The blazes you did!"

"Yes; I dreamed that she was alive, and had me arrested for killing her father."

Langleigh rubbed his chin in a nervous way, and then suddenly added:

"Have you placed both of them under the sod?"

Bunker looked very much embarrassed.

"We buried Templeton, but—"

"Why do you pause? Man, you don't mean to say there is anything wrong about the girl?"

The speaker grasped Bunker's arm in a way which gave the sheriff pain.

"You may ez wal know it all," the subordinate, irritably replied. "Tobin and Piper made a botch o' the job, an' the gal escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Yes."

"Great heavens! how was that?"

"Wal, you see their grit oozed out, an', instead of doing what I tol' 'em, they lowered her inter Griffin's Well, thinkin' she would soon go under thar. But she didn't—not by a mighty sight. Somebody—we don't know who—come along an' rescued her."

Langleigh gazed at the sheriff in speechless dismay for a moment. Then he gasped:

"And where is she now?"

"That is what we don't know. One o' the men thought he seen her, or her ghost, by the cabin o' Zelda, the half-breed, so we descended on the place. The cabin was empty, but we got the bloodhound an' he found a trail. He led us ter the mountain, an' we thought we was on the track, but we lost the dog an' didn't find the gal. Thar was somethin' about it we didn't onderstan', but I hev a suspicion that Yank Yellowbird an' his gang was on the mountain, an' that they killed the dog."

"Always Yank Yellowbird!"

"He does seem ter be active—they call him the Hustler o' Hardscrabble, ye know."

"If he interferes with us, he will get hustled into his grave," growled Langleigh.

"I hope so."

"Why do you think he was concerned in it?"

"Abe Rooks was watchin' Yank's hut, ter git at Buckingham, an' he says they an' the dumb Modoc come in right late."

"And Vivian Templeton is really alive!"

"I'm afeerd she is."

"Do you suppose your man saw her at the half-breed's cabin?"

"Posserbly he did; the Injungal is great fur roamin' in the hills, an' it'd be jest like her ter rescue t'other female from Griffin's Well."

"I've seen this Zelda about town. Rather pretty, ain't she?"

"Yes."

"Also dangerous, I dare say. Mix red blood and white, and you get all the bad of both races. Watch your chance, Bob, and if you find that the squaw *did* help Vivian, remember she is only an Indian and finish her off. As for the Templeton girl—she *must* be found."

"I'll do it—I swear it."

"Are you sure old Templeton is dead?"

"I am," Bunker answered. "We found his body whar we left it, two weeks afore, an' put it under three feet of 'arth. Don't fear as ter him."

"I fear Buckingham most of all. If he has become a champion of the girl, he knows enough to hang us a dozen times over. But, Bunker, I have a plan by which we may sweep him, Yank Yellowbird and the mute Modoc all from the earth at one blow."

"Good! What is it?"

"I'll write a decoy note, purporting to be from a certain girl I have in mind, asking the three men to meet her just outside the town. We will be there, with a dozen of the men, and before the trio suspects danger, we'll drop 'em all with one discharge of rifles—a regular volley."

"But will it work?" slowly asked Bunker.

"I believe it will, for I know a weak point in the Secret Service Sleuth's armor. Yes, I feel sure it'll work, and we'll make a clean sweep of the gang. It is clear that if we let Buckingham flourish around here he will be the death of us; we will strike first and wipe him out of existence!"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE BEAUTIFUL HALF-BREED.

THE sun had set in a blaze of glory, and Ben Buckingham, who had been outside the village, was making his way back to Yank Yellowbird's hut. The one night he had at first purposed passing there had been made several nights, and he had settled down to the mountaineer's daily life with what seemed no thought beyond it.

He had grown to like Yank. The West testified to his courage and skill in time of danger, and Ben daily saw his honesty and good-humor strongly illustrated. There was nothing of the vagabond about him. He was scrupulously neat in all things, and though a lover of simple life, had no sympathy with what was low. He had a dignity, too, as unconscious as that of the forest pine, which would occasionally break through his genial good-humor and impress all candid minds.

Trail-Lifter was also a noticeable character in his way. Quiet as he nearly always was, the rover felt that his wild, Indian blood was un-

tamed. His great, black eyes were full of fire, and his really handsome face expressed lofty courage. Ben felt that the youth had all the instincts of a warrior, and longed to talk with him. This was out of the question, for though he was fast learning that mute language so plain to Yank, there was still much to learn.

Buckingham was thinking deeply as he walked toward the hut on this occasion, and almost before he knew it he found himself near the cabin of Zelda, the half-blood.

The discovery quickly aroused him.

He had studiously avoided the vicinity, and had resolved never to pay more attention to her unless he received decided encouragement, but he could not so easily banish her from his thoughts.

By an exercise of will power he now quickened rather than slackened his pace as he neared her home, but suddenly came to a halt not fifty feet from the door.

In the semi-darkness he had come face to face with Zelda herself.

He had no choice but to pause, and as he did so he politely removed his hat.

"Good-evening, Miss Zelda," he said, quietly.

"Good-evening."

The reply was prompt, but the tone was not encouraging.

"I see that you are still safe."

"Yes."

"But I am surprised to see you here again."

"Why so?"

"Your enemies may make a second descent on your habitation; indeed, such a thing seems almost certain."

The girl laughed shortly.

"Let them come; I am not afraid of them."

"Then why was that night-journey—flight, rather—necessary?"

"It was necessary then, but not now."

"Your enemies are not less hostile, are they?"

Zelda struck one of her hands lightly upon the fancy rifle Ben remembered so well.

"If they want to see me, let them come. They will find that I can care for myself; I ask no favors of them."

Ben looked at the speaker in doubt and uncertainty. He wished that the darkness was less pronounced; he would gladly have studied her face, to see if it conformed with her bold words; he was more than ever puzzled by her manner.

"You are a strange girl!" he exclaimed.

"Why? Because I can care for myself?"

"Not that, wholly, but—well, I can't explain it; you confuse my ideas, and baffle my judgment."

Again she laughed in her short way.

"Don't try to understand," she advised.

"I know that you wish me to remain in the dark. Likewise, I think it best that I should not see you."

"I am not keeping you."

"And do you send me away?" he asked, in a tone of perceptible chagrin.

"You said that you did not want to see me."

"Then I made a foolish speech. I do, and do not, want to see you; or, rather, I don't know what I do want. I hope that sounds sufficiently incoherent, but it is surely less so than my own mind."

"You are in a bad mood; get rid of it. Go abroad a good deal; visit the mountains, and see the beauties of Nature; hunt the game to be found in the hills. There's nothing better to make the mind healthy."

"Great heavens! and now you turn philosopher!" Buckingham exclaimed.

"Say physician, and you will have it nearer."

"Good! We will say that, and you shall be the physician. Can you minister to a mind diseased?"

"The advice I gave was for just that."

"Then you think my mind diseased?"

"Now you grow bitter," returned Zelda, almost with a soothing accent. "Come, that is wrong. I am your friend, if you can't understand me. Perhaps you will understand some time; yes, I think you will. Let me give you hope. Wait patiently, Blacklock Ben, and the time will come when you will see clearly. Wait for that day; don't leave Medicine Springs!"

These words were spoken with an earnestness in strong contrast to her former light manner, and they went home to Ben's mind with incisive force. A reply trembled on his lips, but before he could say anything Zelda put out her hand and quickly added:

"Now I must go. Let us part good friends!"

Long before, the rover had determined to remain outwardly indifferent and let the girl do as she saw fit. Now he wished to reply to what she had said, but he crushed back his inclinations, pressed her hand and said good-night as imperceptibly as possible.

Zelda flitted away, but paused at the door of her cabin.

"Faith and courage win many a battle!" she said, and then, waving her hand, disappeared from his sight.

Buckingham looked for a moment; then turned resolutely and went on his way.

His mind had never been in such a chaos before. To attempt to analyze it, and record all the thoughts, doubts and suspicions which were there, would require more space than the sub-



jeet will admit. Enough to say that this interview had greatly increased his perplexity.

"Of one thing only am I certain," he thought, as he neared Yank's hut; "unless I want to get hopelessly entangled with a girl who has Indian blood in her veins, I must keep away from Zeldal!"

He walked into the mountaineer's habitation with a tread which was certainly heavy, and might well be called stubborn; his mind was directing his feet.

"Home ag'in?" asked Yank, in his usual genial manner. "Wal, I'm glad on't, fur I want ter consult ye."

"In regard to what?"

"Miss Hannah Kitchen!"

"What! has she been here again?"

"No," replied Yank, "an' I don't mean she shall. I am goin' ter have sev'ral locks, bolts an' bars put onter the door; I'll keep that egregious female out of engenuity kin do it. Thar's one thing I won't do, an' that is ter change my name ter Canary. Why, all the Yellowbirds for twenty or thirty generations back would be risin' up an' ha'tnin' my onquiet sleep, ter ask me why I'd forgot my pedigree thusly."

"I take it you have seen Miss Kitchen, somewhere."

"I hev, by hurley! an' of all the triberlations an' distresses I ever heern on, I'm in the wu'st. I met her in the street, an' she took me prisoner o' war. Got me cornered, an' the way she laid down the law was egregiously onpleasant. I tol' my left foot ter run, an' carry me off with it, but my right foot was so skeered it couldn't foller the weak sister, an' we all stayed thar in a heap an' drunk in the entrancin' sweetness o' Miss Kitchen's discourse. By the way, Benjamin, d'ye know how much fryin'-pans cost by the cart-load?"

"No. I am sorry, for I divine your intentions."

"I hope ye a'prove on'em. Tell ye what, I'm goin' ter give her a flood o' fryin'-pans; I'll send enough fur practical use, an' then she kin take the rest an' wear 'em 'round her neck, as some females does beads. I consait that ef the supply o' fryin'-pans don't give out, I kin buy her off."

"No doubt, for I think she means well," answered Buckingham, smiling.

"Yas, an' she'd do wal only that her inside bein' is so egregiously out o' kilter. An inside bein' is a troublesome thing, an' you can't never tell when it'll break out like a volcano. I take it Miss Kitchen's case is chronic, fur her mind runs ter poetry, an' poetry is the last stage o' a disordered inside bein'. Member distinctly when a cousin o' mine was took that way. Ev'ry weddin' or funeral in town—female minds run egregiously ter sech things—she'd set down an' write a poem. She perdoosed sev'ral pounds o' the melancholy matter ev'ry week. All kinds o' poetry is named, like dogs an' hosses, an' she learnt me the names, though I never got so I could call 'em by name when I met 'em in print. Most o' these names I've forgot, but thar was canters, linnets, idols, roundabouts, ipecacs, muddygals an' pasture-poems. Ef Miss Kitchen writes poetry, I should say by the way she worries me that she'd mostly deal in canters an' roundabouts."

Yank's quaintness was irresistible to Buckingham, and he made no effort to interrupt until the mountaineer came to a stop.

Then he more gravely observed:

"I, too, have had an encounter, Nevermiss."

"Not with Abe Rooks?"

"No; with Zeldal."

Yank started perceptibly, and then slowly replied:

"That so?"

"Yes. I met her accidentally near her cabin."

"I s'pose she was in her usual speerits?"

"She seemed to be, but, Nevermiss, is it safe for her to be here in the village?"

"Why not?" irritably repeated the rover.

"Have you forgotten our night flight? What would have happened then, only for that flight? And now she is back in the village, living alone within reach of her enemies."

Yank stroked his beard slowly, and philosophically answered:

"Wal, you see that sarcumstances alter cases; they alter 'em egregiously. That danger is past, an' I dar'say the half-Injun gal knows when she's safe. She ain't the kind o' a person who is blind mentally, but she's alert an' far-seem'. I b'lieve she might hev been a second-sight oracle—I do, by hurley! Anyhow, she kin see a long ways, an' see clear, too."

"I perceive that you are fully in her confidence," answered Ben, rather sulkily.

"Wal, some; that is, I think I understan' her as wal as a woman kin be understood."

"How long have you known her?"

"Six months, or more; yes, I think it will over-run six months by four or five days," admitted Yank, with praiseworthy regard for exactness.

"Did you know her parents?"

"Not that I'm aware on."

"Has she always lived in Medicine Springs?"

"No, fur the town is only 'bout three year old,

I b'lieve. Afore that, she lived among some o' her folks, somewhar, I believe; though I ain't sure they was relations o' hers."

"Her life is a strange one for one of her sex."

"'Tis sorter hum-drum fur an Injun gal," replied the mountaineer, with either singular dullness or obstinacy, "but you must member the red blood is adulterated with white. This last is sorter slow, so ter speak, an' that's what makes her content ter live in a civilized town, I consait."

Ben's investigation was not progressing favorably, and he decided to abandon it. Something else came in the way of an interruption, however; footsteps sounded at the door, and as Nevermiss reached for his rifle, a fourth person entered the hut.

This was Julian Morincy, the telegraph operator.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### MORINCY VISITS THE HUT.

THERE was momentary silence, during which all three men looked at the new-comer. Morincy had come to Medicine Springs in an important capacity, for the telegraph line was a thing dear to Medicine Springs' heart, and there was not a citizen but knew him by sight.

Despite this, Yank was not so ready as usual to give his cheerful greeting, and it was Morincy who spoke first.

"Good-evening, good people!" he said, composedly.

"Evenin', evenin'," responded Yank, though without his usual heartiness.

"Am I welcome at your cabin?" continued the Frenchman, his gaze wandering from Nevermiss to Ben and back again.

"Consait you be; I don't turn nobody away from my door ef they behave as wal as they should. Many a time I've been abroad 'mongst strangers, an' suffrin' egregiously with the newrol'gy, an' a frienly roof would 'a' be'n right welcome. Set down, stranger, an' I'll do all fur ye I kin, though I warn ye that ef you're suffrin' with newrol'gy I can't help ye a bit. Possibly ef ye went ter Doctor Todd an' got b'iled, an' e't some o' his Careless-crower root, it would bring ye around."

The mountaineer had recovered his usual manner, and, having seen Morincy seated near him, was ornamenting his remarks with appropriate gestures of his long fore-finger.

"Fortunately," answered the young Frenchman, smiling, "I am not afflicted with neuralgia. Something of more importance has brought me here."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Ef thar is anything on yer mind I'll relieve ye on't, ef the load ain't too heavy."

"It belongs on your shoulders, so you will have to carry it, anyhow," Morincy retorted, quickly. "May I ask if any of you has received a letter to-day?"

"I ain't been ter the post-office, nor the post-office ain't been over hyar. I ain't had no letter for up'ards of a year, or it may be two years. I ain't got the date on record."

Morincy glanced at Buckingham, who shook his head.

"No letter has come to me."

"I have reason to believe you will get one soon, Mr. Buckingham, and that letter will be a forgery to decoy you into danger."

"Land o' Goshen!" ejaculated Yank.

"May I ask how you know all this?" Ben asked, a trace of suspicion in his voice.

"I overheard a conversation not intended for my ears," the Frenchman coolly admitted.

"But who's goin' ter write ter Benjamin?" asked Nevermiss, with evident curiosity.

"A woman!"

Buckingham started perceptibly.

"A woman!" he echoed.

"Yes. At least, such will seem to be its origin, but it will be a forgery, as I said before. The plotters hope to decoy Mr. Buckingham by making the letter seem like a call from the woman he loves, I dare say."

Ben's gaze flashed to the speaker. He had thought that there was a significance in the last words—a hidden meaning—but Morincy's face was as calm as ever.

"Let us begin this conversation right," the rover said, with considerable determination of manner. "I am not liable to get any letter from 'the woman I love,' for the good reason that there is no such woman. Now, proceed, Mr. Morincy."

"I note your correction," the Frenchman observed, gracefully. "Omitting what I inferred, let me rest on the facts. I heard it said that you were to be decoyed by a letter purporting to be from some lady, and that when you, Mr. Yellowbird and this young warrior answered the call, you were to be shot down as one man by a volley from a dozen assassins."

"A fine scheme!" exclaimed Buckingham.

"To be sure it is," added Yank, "but ef the atrocious insex git me ter slaughter it'll be an egregious surprise ter me, by hurley!"

"You are duly warned," said Morincy.

"We be, young man, an' we thank ye hearty. You've done wal; you've done very wal; you've done most mighty wal, sir."

"But who," asked Ben, "are the would-be assassins?"

"If I tell that," replied the Frenchman, "I must bind you to inviolable secrecy."

"We won't breathe a word," Yank asserted.

"The men were Nelson Langleigh and Sheriff Bunker!"

Trail-Lifter's peculiar whistle followed closely on the announcement. All looked at him; his fingers flashed over, across and under each other rapidly, but Ben utterly lost the message.

"To be sure," said Yank thoughtfully.

"Mr. Morincy," continued Buckingham, "we owe you warm thanks. Langleigh is your employer."

"He did not hire me to keep guilty secrets."

"What more did these men say?"

"I overheard but little. It seems that they hate and fear you, though why I did not learn."

"I was to be decoyed by a forged letter?"

"Yes."

Buckingham knit his forehead into a thoughtful frown; there were ideas in his mind he would not willingly have divulged.

"Langleigh may be your employer, young man," said Yank, "but he's a venomous serpent, an' o' all creetur's I dislike a snake. Benjamin, hev ye any idee what woman would be likely ter write ter you?"

An answer was prevented by the sound of footsteps outside the door. Morincy gave a quick spring and gained the shelter of a box, while Nevermiss as promptly glided to the door. There he met a small, shrewd-looking boy.

"Hello, youngster," saluted the mountaineer, in his easiest manner. "Ain't you out late?"

"Is Mr. Buckingham here?" asked the boy, without noticing the leading question.

"To be sure."

"This letter is for him."

The boy shoved the sealed envelope into Yank's hand, and then beat a retreat with a celerity which indicated that he wished to avoid being questioned. The mountaineer made no effort to detain him, but turned back into the hut.

"The missile has got hyar, sure as hurley!" asserted Yank, gingerly handing it to Ben. "Let's hear what sort o' a bait the egregious critters hev spread afore ye."

Julian Morincy had come out of concealment, and all eyes were bent upon Buckingham. He believed that he could surmise what name would be signed to the letter, and was not only troubled but embarrassed.

All this he concealed under a calm exterior, and deliberately tore open the envelope.

The inclosed note was brief, and read as follows:

"MR. BUCKINGHAM:—Please meet me at the rock by the river at eleven o'clock to night. I have something of importance to say. I hope you will not disappoint me; I expect to see you. I. E. L."

Nobody knew better than the rover that these letters were intended to represent the initials of Imogene Langleigh, and he found himself placed in a delicate position.

The letter was a decoy, and as such its supposed source must be one from which he would naturally expect a letter. Yank and his other companions would understand this; and if the letter was shown them with a statement that he did not know who "I. E. L." was, they would surely surmise her identity at once, or, failing that, would study it out.

To frankly confess that "I. E. L." was Imogene Langleigh would be to admit that he had reason to expect a letter from her, and though, as we have seen, he had more than once met the girl since he came to Medicine Springs, he was anxious to keep the matter secret.

True, it was known, it seemed to Langleigh, but so much was represented in his acquaintance with Imogene that he was not willing to let another into the secret, even though it be Yank Yellowbird.

He quietly put the note away in his pocket.

"The decoy has come," he tersely observed.

Nevermiss stroked his beard and seemed to wait for more information, but it was not vouchsafed. Then the mountaineer dryly observed:

"It's egregiously vexing ter git a love-letter an' find that 'tain't one arter all. I know, 'cause I've had experience—leastways, a frien' o' mine had."

"But this is not a love-letter. I think that I said I did not receive such."

"It's credible ter you that ye don't, fur of all the things I know on, love will upset a man's inside bein' the most. Ef I's a doctor," added Yank, shaking his fore finger gravely at the rover, "an' skilled in the cause an' effect o' drugs, sediments an' anecdotes, I'd turn all my genius to curin' voy'lent cases o' love. I reckon I could build up an egregious practice. So the decoy has come?"

"Yes."

"I ain't seen you go yit."

"I am tempted to go, and give those scoundrels a lasting lesson."

"Don't ye do it. Let 'em grovel in the mud o' their own dissipated plot."

"By all means, keep away," said Morincy.

"It is evident that I have enemies in this town."



"We all hev," said Yank, "an' it strikes me that the cause o' our danger comes from one common p'int. Ef I's ter name the biggest rascal in town, I'd say Nelse Langleigh. He'd or'ter be put a-b'ilin', hisself, in his confounded old mud-hole he calls a Hydrophobia cure."

"Hydropathic is the word," suggested Morincy.

"Mud-hole is shorter, an' that's all 'tis, by hurley."

The Frenchman suddenly arose.

"I will leave you now," he observed.

"Goin' home?" questioned Yank.

"Yes."

"I'll walk 'long with ye. I've got business o' some 'portance that way, an' I feel the need o' fresh air arter all this commotion. Ef the enemy had had their way we would all been massacred ter-night, an' arter any danger I like ter use my legs, an' be sure the j'int's are in good order."

Buckingham once more thanked Morincy for his friendly offer, repeated his promise not to divulge the source of his information, and then telegrapher and Yank went out together. Their steps had hardly ceased to be heard in the hut when Ben arose and took up his rifle.

Trail-Lifter gazed at him with a world of questioning in his wild, dark eyes.

"I am going out for a short time," the rover explained, "but will soon return."

The mute Modoc drew one finger several times across the palm of the other hand in a zigzag way, as though to imitate writing, and pointed toward the river.

"No," answered Ben; "I am not going to meet the men who sent the decoy letter."

Trail-Lifter touched his own breast, but the rover shook his head.

"I prefer to go alone," he replied. "Have no fear; I will not rashly run my head into danger. If Nevermiss returns before me, say to him that I will soon come."

Shouldering his rifle he left the hut and walked rapidly away in the darkness. The young Modoc went to the door and gazed wishfully after him. He was shrewd enough to know that no common motive had taken Ben away, and only that he feared Yank would not approve of his shadowing a trusted guest, he would have followed like a bloodhound.

As it was, he shook his head doubtfully and went back into the hut.

He might have been more troubled had he known what was in Buckingham's mind.

The latter had formed a rash resolution. Knowing that Imogene ought to know what had occurred, and that their own acquaintance was in all probability discovered, he had determined to notify her at once, if possible.

To do this he would have to enter Nelson Langleigh's house, and this would be an extremely rash step. Blacklock Ben was not the man to be daunted, however; he intended to try it.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A STARTLING ENCOUNTER.

BUCKINGHAM was not in good-humor. When he came to Medicine Springs he had come with an object of great importance. He had been anxious to keep his intentions secret. Now it seemed that his meetings with Imogene were known to Nelson Langleigh. What more did that person know?

"His scheme to dispose of me so summarily shows that he has some suspicion. What is it? Imogene declares that she has made no confidant whatever, so it must be that he knows, or suspects, who I am."

The rover's hand worked nervously upon the lock of his rifle. He certainly owed Nelson Langleigh no good will, and only for certain matters which required delay, he would not have cared how soon the crisis came.

"Let him set his assassins upon me," the young man muttered. "I have full warning now, and do not fear them. One thing is certain, if it does come to a fight, his ruffians will receive no mercy. He cannot add another of my family to the list of his victims."

Dark was the face of the rover, but he suddenly paused.

"I must be calm; this is no mood in which to venture near his house. For Imogene's sake I must be cautious and crafty. For her sake! 'Tis a strange fate which has thrown her and me into each other's society as we have been!"

With an effort he now put aside all minor thoughts, and keeping a careful outlook, approached the house. Langleigh might be with his allies at the place of ambush, but it was more likely that he would take good care to have a well-established *alibi*, in case one was needed.

Ben believed that he would be found at home.

Having advanced nearly to the house, the rover paused and proceeded to get some idea of the state of affairs. The place told no tales, however; it was in its usual quiet state, and he could see no one whatever.

Several minutes passed uneventfully, and he was considering how he could get word to Imogene without running any risk, when a young girl came out of the door.

He recognized her at once; her name was

Becky, and he knew her to be Imogene's trusted maid. This girl, Imogene had distinctly said, was one who would be true to her, despite all that Nelson Langleigh could do to the contrary, though she would not willingly have trusted all her secrets to the maid.

Becky paused at the door in a way which showed that she had no definite purpose in view.

Buckingham's decision was at once made; he walked boldly forward and accosted her:

"Good-evening. Is Mr. Langleigh in?"

"No, sir," answered Becky, looking at the young man sharply. "He went out half an hour ago."

"Is Miss Imogene in?"

"Yes, sir."

"And at liberty?"

"I think she is, sir."

"I will see her."

Ben spoke very quietly, but it remained a fact that it was a hazardous venture for him to enter the house. He was acting systematically, however. A mere call would not excite so much suspicion, as for him, a supposed stranger, to ask to see Imogene outside. Besides, he wanted to show her the forged note, and see if she recognized the writing.

All would probably work well—unless he was so unlucky as to encounter Langleigh.

He entered the house; Becky escorted him to the parlor.

"What name?" she inquired.

"Simply say, 'A gentleman to see Miss Langleigh.'"

The girl went her way, and the rover calmly seated himself. His gaze wandered over the well-furnished parlor, and a bitter expression appeared on his face.

"This is the luxury that Nelson Langleigh enjoys, when he ought, at the very least, to be in State Prison for life. Fate is not always just, but justice sometimes sharpens her sword after long years. Langleigh may scheme all that he sees fit against me, but I have a conviction that I shall pass unharmed through all this plot. But what would Imogene say if she knew all?"

His meditations were interrupted by the rustle of a woman's dress, and Imogene entered the room. Buckingham rose.

Imogene stopped short at sight of him.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"As you see, Miss Langleigh."

The young lady glanced around somewhat nervously.

"Isn't this dangerous?" she asked.

"It is, no doubt, but no common motive led me to come here. I will proceed to business at once. Pray, have you lately written me a note, or sent one?"

"A note? Certainly not."

"I have received one, purporting to be from you."

Imogene changed color perceptibly.

"Then it is a forgery!"

"I thought as much. Who could have written it?"

The girl looked startled.

"I hope that my father—"

"Here is the note. Possibly you will recognize the handwriting."

She received the decoy, and held it near the light with a hand which trembled a trifle.

"It is a very fair imitation of my writing, but I never saw it before!" she declared. "I know who did write it, though."

"And that was?"

"Nelson Langleigh!"

She spoke in a hard voice. Her first alarm had passed, and though she saw danger menacing her, the innate strength of her nature was making itself felt.

"He certainly wrote it," she added, "and this shows conclusively that he has penetrated our secret to more or less of a degree. But why in the world should he write such a note as this—why appoint an interview?"

"Are you willing to hear the whole truth?"

"Most certainly. In order to protect myself I should—I must—know all."

"You are undoubtedly right, though the revelation may be a harsh one for you to hear. If there was a doubt as to his purpose, it is dispelled by information which I have received. If I had blindly walked into this trap, his tools would have done their best to murder me."

Imogene recoiled.

"Great heavens! is he as much of a villain as that?"

"There isn't a doubt of it. He and that precious knave, Bunker, have put their heads together and formed a fine plot to dispose of me; but you need not have any fear of my entering it. I am abundantly able to care for myself."

"He has fully penetrated our secret, then?"

"Looks like it."

"Probably he knows that you are the Secret Service Sleuth."

"If he doesn't, I'll convince him before I am through!" Ben grimly replied.

"It will be a determined battle now," said Imogene, with thoughtful gravity.

"Do you feel able to cope with him?"

"I do!" was the resolute response. "But you—there is greater danger for you, if he has gone to the extreme point of seeking your life."

"Don't give that a thought," the rover evenly replied. "Of course I am accustomed to such things; my whole life has been one of peril and adventure. Have no fear whatever."

"I am afraid there is trouble and tragedy ahead."

"Oh! that may not follow," Ben lightly observed, though, if he had spoken his mind, he would have said that such a state of affairs was inevitable. "We are now fully on our guard; and know just what to expect and look out for; the main thing now is not to be overreached by any wily trick. And now, Miss Langleigh, I will leave you. It would make a bad complication if Langleigh was to return and find me here."

He arose, but, as he did so, steps sounded in the hall. Both Ben and Imogene looked quickly, apprehensively that way. The door opened; a man entered.

It was Nelson Langleigh!

The new-comer saw Buckingham and came to a sudden stop. His face was a panorama. No thought of Ben's presence there had entered his mind; nothing would have surprised or startled him more.

He had grown pale, and surprise, dismay and fear were expressed on his face. When he entered the house he had been wondering if his tools had yet done their work and disposed of the Secret Service Sleuth; now that he saw him there he was impressed with the idea that the young man had been in the trap, had escaped and come there to accuse him.

The pale, trembling man who stood by the door was very unlike the proud master of Medicine Springs, but Buckingham had never been cooler.

He did not intend to accuse Langleigh, and his active mind at once marked out his course. He bowed and smiled in the blandest way imaginable.

"This is Mr. Langleigh, I think," he said.

Imogene quickly took the hint:

"Yes, sir," she distantly replied, "this is my father."

"Mr. Langleigh, I have come to see you on a matter of business," added Buckingham coolly, although he had not the slightest idea what business he intended to offer as an excuse.

The elder man drew a long breath. He felt like one on the verge of a volcano's crater, but all his combativeness rose to aid him, and he felt a thrill of anger that his enemy should have the audacity to come there.

He stretched out one hand toward the door.

"Go!" he said, huskily.

"Pardon me; I am not sure that I understand," returned Ben, with unwavering composure.

"Leave this house!" hissed Langleigh.

"That's plain enough, but isn't your way a trifle brusque and summary?"

"Fool!" exclaimed the elder man, "don't think to act a part here and blind my eyes. You and I need no fine words, no deception, no conference. Leave this house!"

Buckingham glanced at Imogene; she understood the look, and said in a voice inaudible to Langleigh:

"Go! Have no fear for me; I can care for myself!"

"Are you going?" thundered Langleigh, his anger rising to white heat as he saw this secret proceeding. "Will you go quickly, or shall I call the servants and have you thrown out? I am master here, and will not yield a point to the devil himself. For the last time—leave this house!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### IMOGENE'S SENTENCE.

BLACKLOCK BEN turned to Langleigh with a smile upon his face, but there was a slight glimmer in his eyes which told of an unsubdued spirit.

"I am all ready to go," he said lightly, "but I have some curiosity to see how you keep your promises. You have said that you will have me thrown out—call your men, and let me see it done."

This cool defiance angered Langleigh anew, and he loudly shouted into the hall:

"Here! This way. Abram! Come here, everybody!"

Buckingham laughed.

"That's right; bring in the whole gang; you'll need them. By the way, why not set the example by taking hold of me yourself?"

Before more could be said, Agrippa Ames, the bottling-establishment employee, put in an appearance. He was not attached to the house at all, but had come there with Langleigh on an errand, and the uproar naturally brought him to the scene.

"Here, Ames," directed the master of the house, "throw this scoundrel out!"

"Yes, Ames," added the rover, "pray throw me out!"

Agrippa stared at the smiling speaker in blank wonder, but at that moment Abram also arrived.

"Here, you two men," continued Langleigh, "throw this fellow into the street!"

"That's the idea," Ben agreed; "do your



work, and don't waste any more time about it. Take hold of me!"

He had drawn his powerful form up to its full height, and stood looking down upon them in the most good humored way possible, but neither men made a move to attack him. They noted his evident muscular powers, and his coolness showed that he would be a bad man to molest.

"H-h-hadn't we b-better call more help?" asked Ames, with his usual halting speech.

"That's a good idea," added Abram.

"What? are you two afraid to attack one man?" retorted the rover.

"I'm n-n-not afraid," asserted Agrippa, "but I don't like to have any t-trouble."

"That's it," coincided Abram; "we don't want any trouble, you know."

Langleigh was momentarily speechless with anger, but Buckingham laughed lightly. He had accomplished his object, and shown Langleigh that he could not over-ride every one in his imperious way; now he was perfectly willing to leave the house.

"We will all go out together," he said. "I don't see any earthly reason why we should quarrel. Good-night, my dear Mr. Langleigh!"

The rover nodded to father and daughter, and then walked out of the room in the quietest way imaginable.

"Go with him to the street, Amos," directed Langleigh, recovering his self-possession somewhat.

Agrippa obeyed, while Abram, making a pretense of looking to the outer door, prudently forgot to return to his master. Langleigh, however, had thought only of the subject nearest his heart, and he turned upon Imogene with anger and menace in every movement. Father and daughter looked each other full in the eyes—he pale, troubled, angry and threatening; she, strangely calm, with her queenly form erect and gaze undaunted.

"Girl," said Langleigh, in a low, husky voice, "what does this mean?"

"Upon my word, sir," was her steady reply, "I should say that was a question for you to answer. You find a person here who politely states that he has business with you: then you rudely order him from the house. I don't wonder you think that an explanation is needed."

"Girl, do you think me an idiot?" hoarsely demanded Langleigh.

"I think you are injudicious."

"At least I am not blind."

"I should say that you are."

"I believe you; your conduct proves that you think me so. Cease deceiving yourself. You and that ruffian who has just left are not so shrewd as you think; I know you, and him, and your secrets."

"It must be a heavy load for you to carry."

"However that may be, you cannot deceive me."

"Well?"

Imogene remained as impassive as ever.

"Well!" repeated Langleigh, irritably. "You will find it anything but well. You and Buckingham have declared war, and you shall have it to the bitter end."

"What do you mean?"

"That if you will not have me for a friend, you shall have me for an enemy."

"That is a very fatherly speech."

Langleigh made an impatient gesture.

"Bear in mind," he said, coldly, "that you are still in my house, and subject to my orders. It is my will that you marry Cecil Montclair, and you shall do it before a week has passed."

Imogene smiled; her secret marriage to John Kirk had been timely, and she felt her position impregnable.

"Scoff at my words if you will," Langleigh added, "but you will soon change your manner. From this hour you may consider yourself a prisoner in this house."

The girl recoiled.

"What?" she cried.

"So that touches you, eh? I thought it would. I repeat, you are not to leave this house—not until you are Cecil's wife. I shall give orders to the servants to that effect."

By this time Imogene's eyes were flashing.

"Sir," she exclaimed, "you dare not subject me to such an indignity!"

"I shall do precisely as I say."

"I will not submit!"

"You will submit, because you cannot help yourself. No doubt Buckingham will get in a fever for your sake, but he will rage in vain. The servants here are enough to make you obey, while as for Buckingham, all Medicine Springs is at my back. I think I can care for him!"

"You plan very well, sir, but I shall not submit to imprisonment."

"How will you avoid it?"

"I shall leave the house!" Imogene firmly declared.

"You will not leave the house. I shall order the servants to keep you in; if you try to go, you will be made a veritable prisoner in your own room. This will be your daily life until you consent to marry Montclair."

Imogene was trembling with excitement, and

her breath was drawn in a way which made her bosom heave with the pent-up emotion; the proposed indignity aroused all her indignation, and she had no respect to give this man, who had never deserved it by one kind or fatherly act.

The last words did much to calm her; she felt a sense of exultation that her marriage would baffle all plans in regard to Montclair. Surely, she must win in the end.

With a great effort she mastered her emotion, and turning, swept from the room. As she passed the door, she sent back one terse sentence which had a significance not apparent to Langleigh:

"We shall see!"

And then she passed composedly to her room. In the mean while, Buckingham had left the house, and, according to orders, Agrippa Ames attended him.

Once in the street, the rover turned upon his companion.

"My man, would you fight for such a person as Nelson Langleigh?" he asked, abruptly.

"He's m-m-my employer," Agrippa replied.

"Did you contract to help him in his villainy?"

"M-my work is s-s-solely in the bath-house."

"Keep it there, if you would be wise. This is not a threat, but friendly advice."

"You d-d-don't seem to be a f-friend of Langleigh," returned Agrippa. "Wh-what's the trouble?"

"Never mind, my good man."

"Well, I h-hope you don't regard m-me as your enemy, anyh-h-how."

"Not at present, and I will not do so as long as you behave well. Now good-night. Be sure you're right; then go ahead."

With this parting injunction the rover walked away. In a few minutes he reached Yank Yellowbird's hut, where he found the tall mountaineer and Trail-Lifter still sitting up.

"Hello!" saluted Yank. "So you're back ag'in, safe an' sound. Expected you'd come in ridin' on an ambulance, by hurley! Ain't b'en ter the rendervows, ter git shot, hev ye?"

"Hardly," Ben answered; "my taste don't run that way."

"I should hope not; I hate a man that's always bankerin' ter be shot. Knowed a man onc't who had an egregious weakness that way, an' ef he hadn't three or four fresh gun-shot wounds all the time he wa'n't happy. When ever thar was a fracas, an' two men got ter shootin' at each other, he'd step in between an' ketch all the bullets in some part o' his system. He got so full o' lead that when a bullet struck him it would rattle 'round among other bullets in his body like marbles clickin' ag'in' each other. He was finally captured an' killed by the Injuns, an' they roasted him an' run him inter bullets. Thar was enough lead in him ter last one tribe o' the red varmints durin' a two year hostile campaign. Ain't got any more letters, hev ye?"

Yank asked the last question abruptly.

"No," Ben answered.

"Pecooliar circumstance, wa'n't it?"

"Decidedly so."

"Was egregiously beset with love-letters, myself, when I's young. The gals was all beset on me, an' the letters they writ filled an ox-cart full ev'ry day. It's amazin' how much love a gal can git inter a letter when she sets out, ain't it?"

"Lacking experience, I am unable to say. Let it be understood, friend Yank, that I do not receive love-letters, nor expect to."

"It's curious, by hurley!"

Yank stroked his beard meditatively, but did not see fit to state in plain words what his last remark referred to. Ben, however, was well aware that he desired an explanation of the forged letter, with the name of the writer. This he would gladly have made had he been able to do so without betraying Imogene's secrets; Yank was worthy of confidence, but the rover felt that he had no right to tell what Imogene wished should be kept secret.

The mountaineer gave him abundant time to explain, but, as such a step was not taken, refrained with characteristic discretion and modesty from asking direct what he wanted to know.

"I consait," he finally said, "that thar is goin' ter be lively times."

"Yes."

"Medicine Springs won't never be parfict ontill it's had an eruption. Thar's triberlation an' distress in its stomach, so ter speak, an' it's got ter throw off the clique o' vampires that is worryin' it."

"You name them well; they are a veritable vampire clique. But, Yank, is it right that I should remain at your cabin? Have I any right to involve you in my quarrel?" Buckingham seriously asked.

"Land o' Goshen! don't be alarmed 'bout me. I'm never so happy as when I'm a-revolv'in' in a quirel, only I'm pooty sure ter make sartain I'm on the side o' jestic."

"I feel sure you are, and I value your friendship highly. But Langleigh is sure to use every effort to overreach and slay me."

"Let the atrocious insex go it!" Yank retorted. "We don't keer a mite fur his obnoxiousity."

Let him set on his gang! We'll teach 'em a lesson in humility, by hurley!"

The mountaineer smote his knee emphatically, and Ben, pleased at having so redoubtable an ally, reached over and grasped his broad hand warmly.

"We will fight them to the bitter end!" he declared.

## CHAPTER XXV.

ZELDA.

YANK YELLOWBIRD finished cleaning his revolver and put the weapon carefully away in his belt.

"We live in critikel days," he observed to Buckingham. "When things git ter goin' in a lopsided way like this, thar is no knowin' when the crash will come. It behooves us ter hev our lamps trimmed an' burnin', an' our weapons loaded ter the muzzle. I consait that fightin' is as sure as life itself, an' ef thar is any egregious skirmish I want ter be thar. Very likely the weak sister would git skeered, but a man o' my pedigree can fight with one leg—an' run with t'other."

"Your reputation shows that your left foot don't run very often," remarked Ben.

"That's because the weak sister is sly; it will run, but it ain't big enough idjit ter tell on't—not much it ain't. The infirmity o' a weak sister I inherit from an ancestor o' mine named Goliath. He was brave as a grizzly in his head, an' mighty muscular in his arms, but his left foot was a weak sister. Our famly traditions say that when he's goin' ter battle he'd often hev ter bend down an' yank the weak sister 'long toward the field o' hostilities, an' at the battle o' Thermometer he chained his left foot ter a cottonwood tree an' jest stood thar an' slewed the innemy. When the fracas was over he was pooty near slewed himself, but he'd downed so many scribes an' Fairy-seers that it cost him up-wards o' a billion dollars ter pay the undertaker fur buryin' 'em. 'Twas an egregious big bill," added the mountaineer, gravely, as he waved his finger at Ben, "but the famly was wal-ter-do then, havin' wal-watered stock in a gold-mine run by King Solomon."

Footsteps outside the door caused a diversion. The little party in the hut had passed a peaceful night, and eaten breakfast undisturbed, but all had a feeling that danger might come at any moment.

Yank's face was as mild and composed as ever as he looked to see who was coming, but it was interesting to see the wild light which flashed in the eyes of the mute Modoc.

If appearances were to be relied upon, nothing else would please Trail-Lifter so much as war.

The entrance was darkened, and Abel Gault, the detective, appeared to view. He nodded to Nevermiss in a frank, good-humored way.

"Good-morning, friend Yellowbird," he said, promptly.

"I'm wal," was Yank's brief, ungracious reply.

"That is good news. I hope you are also in condition for taking the trail."

"Mister," quoth the mountaineer, bringing his long fore-finger to bear upon Gault like a gun. "ef you've got anything ter say, say it; don't deal in ambigotry. Ef thar is an atrocious thing which I don't like it's ambigotry. I was born with antipathies, and they will stick to me. Speak plain, Mr. Man-Hunter."

"I have no desire to be ambiguous, if that is what you mean," Gault answered. "In a word, I am here to see if you haven't reconsidered your determination about helping us find the Templetons. I would give more for your aid in this matter than that of any other man. Nevermiss."

"Ef I remember right, I've tol' ye sev'ral times that I ain't a man-hunter. And, by hurley! I ain't a woman-hunter—not much, I ain't!" Yank emphatically averred.

"I will pay you well."

"I ain't ter be hired."

"Surely, you haven't the neuralgia now," and Gault tried to work a more friendly vein into the case.

"It's snappin' my j'int's all the time," replied the mountaineer, "but 'tain't the newrol'gy that objects—it's me."

"Really, I can't see why you're so obstinate."

"Land o' Goshen!" exclaimed Yank, with unusual warmth, "was thar ever another head as thick as yours? The long an' short on't is, mister, my sympathies ain't with ye, an' I won't help ye hunt no woman. Now d'ye onnerstand?"

"I have a new clew," urged Gault, pertinaciously.

"Have ye?"

"Yes. My attention has been directed to a half-breed Indian girl, named Zelda. I suspect that she may know where Templeton and his daughter are hidden."

Buckingham's gaze had wandered to Yank. Was it fancy, or did the veteran show some disturbance at the mention of Zelda's name? If so it was but slight, and Gault saw nothing.

"Mebbe she's got 'em in her pocket," Yank retorted.



"Be serious, Mr. Yellowbird."

"You'll make me serious, Man-Hunter, ef you keep on with yer foolish talk—you will, by hurley! Don't ye say no more 'bout Zelda. She's a frien' o' mine, I'll hev ye ter know; an' she ain't no helper o' criminals. Now don't say no more; let the subject drop."

"I will do so," Gault replied, angrily. "I see that I have misjudged you; I thought that you were a law-abiding citizen. It is well for Medicine Springs that there are few here like you."

"Don't make no remarks derogatorish ter the Yellowbird family," advised the veteran. "Ef you find a chap named Canary, say what you see fit ag'in' him; he ain't no relation o' mine. The Yellowbirds are few in number, but very select in quality."

"Remarkable persons, no doubt!" said Gault, with sarcasm.

"To be sure, they be. I never had no sister, an' my twin brother died afore he was a month old. Ef he'd lived he'd been an honor ter the country. 'Member distinctly how that baby an' I used ter fight. We both got our dander up easy, an' when it riz, somethin' had ter give way. We scratched, pulled hair, an' stove pooty nigh all the teeth outer each other's mouths. A monstrous fighter my brother was, an' he'd made a commotion ef he'd lived twenty year arter he died. Strange how fate works. The day afore he died he went out orchard-robbin' fur apples, an' when the farmer ketched him at it, he fell outer the tree, a distance o' ninety-seven feet, an' struck on the head o' the farmer. He wasn't hurt none, my brother wa'n't, except that he broke his suspenders, but the next day he took the chronic roomatism, an' it carried him off inside two hours; but it's only fair ter my brother ter say that the disease was of an acute an' malignant type."

"And all this happened before your brother was a month old?"

"That's what I said."

"Then your brother was certainly a wonder," admitted Gault, curtly, as he arose to go.

"Fightin' runs in the fam'ly; I sometimes do a leetle at it, myself."

Yank's gaze rested meaningfully upon the detective, but he did not see fit to perceive anything significant. He said good-day in an ungracious way and left the hut. Trail-Lifter walked to the door and looked after him, while Yank stroked his beard meditatively.

Buckingham suspected what was in his mind and waited patiently.

"A man with an idee," finally observed the mountaineer, "is like a cart behind a hoss. The cart and the man don't amount ter nothin', while the hoss an' the idee hev things all their own way; an' they're liable ter run away an' make a smash-up, any time. Mister Abel Gault suspects Zelda, does he?"

"So he said."

"Benjamin, I feel it in my bones that I shall have ter lick that detective chap, yit."

"Zelda should be warned."

"She's goin' ter be warned, immediate."

Yank arose with an air of determination.

"I'll go ter her cabin, at once," he added.

"I will go out with you," remarked Blacklock Ben, "for I am going to the hills. Say to Miss Zelda that if I can be of service to her, I shall be pleased to have her call upon me. With this new danger added to the persecutions of the Vampire Clique, such aid may be needed."

"You're right, an' I'll tell her. Thank ye fur the offer."

The men parted at the door and Ben walked away alone. He saw Yank walking toward Zelda's cabin, and fell to wondering anew in regard to the mystery which surrounded the beautiful half-breed.

That Yank was fully in her confidence was clear, and he had a dim idea that the two might be secreting the Templetons, of whom he had heard so much; he remembered the cave in the mountain where Zelda had once been left, and wondered if the fugitives were there.

He did not know of the grave in the gulch, made and filled by Bunker and his men, and, for that matter, Yank was also ignorant of it; he knew nothing of Philip Templeton's fate.

In a short time the rover had left the village behind and was passing along the rough ground at the foot of the hills.

Here he could see but a short distance ahead, on account of the rocks and bushes, and it was not until they were almost at hand that he suspected the proximity of other wanderers.

The sight of two such persons brought him to a sudden halt.

There was nothing surprising in the fact that he was not alone there, and under ordinary circumstances he would have quietly avoided his temporary neighbors—but not now.

The other wanderers were Zelda and Julian Morincy.

The two were walking side by side, in earnest conversation, their faces turned toward each other, their eyes meeting in a fixed gaze. It had been something of a shock to Buckingham to find them together, and their manner did not take the edge from his disappointment; that manner was decidedly friendly, not to say lover-like, and when a young couple walk thus, ab-

sorbed wholly in their conversation, it is likely that they are interested.

Blacklock Ben shot an indignant glance at Morincy. What right had the young Frenchman to walk with Zelda?

The rover was jealous, but he was also sensible. Quickly remembering that Zelda was nothing to him, and that the telegrapher had saved him from Bunker's ambush, he crushed back his more selfish feelings.

He philosophically resolved to abide by the course of events, and, as they were coming directly toward him, leaned upon his rifle and awaited their arrival.

Neither saw him until they were almost beside him; then they paused abruptly, and in confusion. Morincy, at least, flushed deeply; Zelda seemed more at ease.

"Good-morning," said Ben, urbanely. "I see that I am not the only one who is enjoying the pure air of the hills."

"No."

Zelda answered hesitatingly, and the rover was willing to spare them any and all embarrassment.

"I know some one who is looking for you, Miss Zelda," he said, kindly.

"Who is it?"

"Yank Yellowbird."

The girl started.

"What does he want?"

"To warn you."

"Why should he warn me?"

Buckingham glanced hesitatingly at Morincy.

"Speak out," continued Zelda; "this is an old friend of mine. You need not fear to speak plainly."

This assertion was not calculated to improve Ben's state of mind, for it showed a degree of confidence in Morincy which had never been accorded him, but he gave no outward sign of disturbance.

"In a word, then," he answered, "there are three officers in this town, the leader of whom is named Gault, who are looking for an escaped convict named Templeton, and his daughter, Vivian. They suspect that you know something about the matter, and propose to seek information of you."

"Much good may it do them!" Zelda retorted, though a look of annoyance and gravity appeared on her face.

Morincy fanned himself with his hat and said nothing.

"Yank," continued the rover, "is looking for you, to give you warning of their intentions."

Before more could be said, the sound of voices at one side furnished an interruption. Ben turned and saw two men approaching, and the discovery made the young man start. The men referred to were Gault and one of his fellow officers, and they had already seen the trio by the rock; they could not be avoided.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### TRAIL-LIFTER'S TIDINGS.

For a moment Buckingham was deeply troubled, but his next feeling was quite different. If Abel Gault wished to find Zelda, he was pretty sure to do so sooner or later, and, in Ben's opinion, it was fortunate that the meeting should take place when she had friends at hand.

He turned to her quickly.

"Here are the men in question, Miss Zelda, but you need have no fear. Probably they will only ask a few questions; in any case, remember that Mr. Morincy and I are here and ready to protect you."

Zelda laughed lightly.

"Bless you!" she replied, "I am not in the least afraid of the men. You can stay if you like, but I am able to deal with these officers. Let them come!"

"If you have a secret, beware how you deal with them."

"What secret could I have?"

"You know what I told you they suspected?"

Further conversation was prevented by the arrival of Gault and his companion, who was Chickering, one of the men who had come West with him. The former looked sharply, suspiciously at Ben, and then turned to the self-possessed girl.

"Your name, young woman, is Zelda, I think," he began, ponderously.

"Yes."

"I would like to speak with you."

"Then why don't you do it?"

The retort did not seem to please Gault, whose face grew more sour and solemn than ever.

"I wish to see you privately," he explained.

"I must decline. Whatever you have to say, you can say in the presence of my friends."

Gault gave Blacklock Ben an angry glance.

"I suppose you have been telling all you know, sir."

"If by that extremely felicitous expression you mean that I have repeated what you said at the hut, I have given a synopsis of it," Ben coolly admitted.

"Young woman," continued Gault, "do you know that I am an officer of law from the East?"

"Is that what you came here to ask me?" Zelda sarcastically inquired, causing Gault new mental disturbance.

"In a word," he shortly replied, "where are the Templetons, father and daughter?"

Zelda looked him in the face, and not a tremor betrayed fear, guilt or excitement.

"Don't know any such persons," she answered.

"Carefully!"

"Carefully yourself!" she retorted.

"Remember who I am. Remember—"

"I don't care who you are. You've asked me a question, and I've answered it. What's the next one?"

"Girl," said Gault, struggling to keep down his anger, "I am an officer of law, and I trust that I am an honest man. Far be it from me willingly to talk severely to a woman. I have my duty to perform, however, and I caution you against defying the law, as represented by me. I am searching for an escaped convict named Templeton, and I believe that he and his daughter, Vivian, are in this vicinity. I have reason to think you can tell me of them if you will, and—"

"Why do you think that?" she interrupted.

"Never mind."

"You offer me great encouragement to tell, don't you? Well, I've nothing to tell; I don't know either one, nor anything about them."

Zelda looked straight into Gault's face, as she made this assertion, and her great, dark eyes did not waver in the least.

"There is a reward offered for the convict's capture."

"I understand, but I can't earn it by telling what I don't know. If anybody led you to suspect me, I don't thank him, or her, for it. I am only an Indian girl, but I am not the friend of guilty persons. That's all I've got to say, and I hope you won't make me repeat it more than a dozen times more!"

Gault bit his lip with vexation, but at that moment hasty steps sounded, and Yank Yellowbird came striding toward the group.

"What in hurley is goin' on hyar?" demanded the veteran, quickly. "Is this a camp-meetin', or temp'rance convention? Ef it's a temp'rance gatherin' I want a hand in it. Hev had a heap o' 'sperience that way. Come nigh signin' a pledge onc't. 'Twas down in Nigger Gulch, an' I struck thar when the temp'rance obsequies was right at their full. Two women was stumpin' the town, an' they worked night an' day fur the cause. Dunno how they kept up their physical muskel, by hurley, unless they imbibed the rum they wouldn't let the men drink."

"The minute I struck town they went fur me. I 'splained my views an' told 'em I was no great on the drink, only usin' speerits when I's sick, with a few drinks atween sicknesses jest ter ward off newrol'gy an' ketchin' epidemics. That wouldn't satisfy 'em; they chucked a docky-munt at me which looked like the Constitution o' the United States, an' wanted me ter sign it, an' sw'ar off an' be a teatokeller; but I told 'em tea was bad fur my newrol'gy, an' that my wrist was so egregious lame I couldn't sign my name plain enough fur my pledge ter stand in court. Wal, sir, fur three days them women jest worried me as a dog does a rat, an' I finally made up mind ter light out. I knowed I couldn't git away easy, so one night I dropped out o' the back winder o' the hotel, all ready ter start."

"Benjamin, it's a solemn fact that when I tetch'd ground thar was one o' them women. I was about prostrated by the diskivery, an' staggered back ag'in' the wall o' the hotel, whereupon she poked the pledge under my nose in a reckless style."

"Sign!" sez she, in a voice like the filin' o' a saw."

"I would ef I could," sez I, "but I ain't a legal voter in this town."

"Misguided man," sez she, "yer depravity is awful ter see."

"Never mind," sez I, "I'm jest leavin' town, depravity an' all."

"No levity," sez she, bangin' me 'cross my left eyebrow with the pledge."

"Not much," sez I; "down with levity."

"Down with whisky!" said she, in an awful voice."

"I ain't dry," sez I, "but ef you hev got yer flask in yer pocket, I'll put down a few swallers, ef ye insist."

"Wretch," sez she, punchin' out two o' my front teeth with the butt end o' the pledge, "your moral karakter is drownin' in whisky!"

"Ef you'll wait hyar," sez I, "I'll go an' git a hook an' line an' fish it out."

"Oh! you male monster," sez she, "you are far gone in infermy. I perceive that the only way ter save ye is ter instill the savin' means o' grace by bodily appercation. You are a bardened sinner, but gentle woman never gives up!"

"With that she began to belabor me over the head with the pledge, an' as it was as big as a small cabin, it hurt like hurley. I took ter my heels, an' she took arter me. I went twenty foot at ev'ry leap, an' every time I jumped she whacked me over the head. I reckon nothin' would been left o' me but my mangled body, but the pledge finally fell ter pieces, an' while she was gath'rin' up the scattered pages I stepped over inter the



next State on important business. I ain't seen her sence. Is this a temp'rance revival?"

"I hope," said Gault, severely, "that you are satisfied now that you have treated us to this balderdash. I also perceive that you are enamored of this Indian girl. Perhaps you know where Templeton is?"

"Wish I did, by hurley! I'd like to do something ter shut off the flow o' yer egregious eloquence."

"I will not stay here to be insulted, but one thing you can depend upon. I have my eye on you, my man! I trust you no more, and if I find that you are trying to baffle me in the discharge of my duty, I'll give you a term in prison as sure as my name is Gault."

"You'd better not try it!" Yank retorted. "The Yellowbirds ain't a race to be trampled onder foot with impunity, nor with boots neither. The hull race from Adam Yellowbird—him that married Eve—down has got a clean pedigree fur pluck an' honor. In the days when Nero was Emp'r'or o' China it was recorded that one on 'em got inter prison, but when 'twas found ter be a chap named Canary, the page was tore out."

"Come, Chickering," said Gault, angrily, "this is no place for us."

"I consait not," agreed Yank. "Good-by ontill we see ye ag'in, an' don't hurry back."

The mountaineer's good-humor had all returned, and as the officers walked away he watched with a smile on his face which seemed wholly free from resentment.

"I reckon you had a circus hyar," he observed.

"Oh! no; only a few remarks between that man and me," Zelda answered.

"I hope he didn't get the best on't."

"Decidedly not," put in Buckingham.

Yank chuckled in great good-humor.

"I'm proud on ye, Zelda, ef ye held yer end up," he declared. "Can't a'preciate nobody that'll git wusted when right an' jestice is on their side. An' now," he added, sweeping a quick glance around the group, "I reckon we'd better git back home. We ain't a comp'ny that ought ter be sec'd together, 'specially Munshear Morincy, hyar. He has been perlite enough ter give me a hint o' danger when we needed it, an' Nelse Langleigh would discharge him quicker'n seat ef he knowed all."

"You are right," Buckingham quickly agreed; "Mr. Morincy must protect himself. Langleigh is my enemy; he would not retain his telegrapher an hour if he knew a favor had been done me. Yank, I will leave you in charge here; I am going on toward higher ground."

He went, while Yank, Zelda and Morincy walked in the opposite direction, toward the girl's cabin. The mountaineer talked earnestly with her as they went, and then, after leaving her at the cabin, walked a few steps with Morincy.

It was time for the latter to be at the telegraph office, however, and as he went Yank was left alone.

The latter wandered on once more, having no definite object in view, but was suddenly brought to a halt. Right in his path appeared Miss Hannah Kitchen, somewhat as Banquo's ghost appeared at the banquet, only that she had a most expansive smile upon her face.

"My dear Mr. Yellowbird!" she cried, "how do you do? I rec'y didn't expect to see you. I have been shoppin' an' am about wearied out, an' these packages are so heavy ter carry. I know you will help me to git them home!"

While speaking she had deftly transferred several of these packages from her arms to Yank's, and there he stood with both hands full and his face the picture of dismay.

"I'm ever so much obliged to you," she added. "I hev a good many cares ter bear, bein' a lone woman, an' I don't forgit them which is kind ter me. I do believe, Mr. Yellowbird, you are the kindest man I ever knew!"

"Glad you've found it out, by hurley!" quoth Yank, a sense of the humorous stealing like sunshine through the clouds of his dismay. "It's b'en my egregious misfortin' ter not be a'preciated all my life, an' now yer sympathy an' yer bundles a'most overpower me."

"Be strong, Mr. Yellowbird!" urged the maiden lady, in her sweetest tones.

"For your sake, Miss Kitchen, marm, I will; yes, for your sake I'll do anything but change my name ter Canary, an' I'd do that only I can't sing no more than a gander under water."

"How funny you talk, Mr. Yellowbird."

"Funny!" repeated Yank managing to get his potent fore-finger loose so that he could level it at her. "Why shouldn't I feel funny? Turn a man inter a dry-good store an' he's bound ter 'perience a change o' heart. Whar's the clerks that b'long with me? Whar's the money-drawer, an' the pooty gals fur customers, an' cheese-box, an' all the other 'tachment? Whar is—"

Yank stopped short. Another figure had crossed his vision—Trail-Lifter, the mute, had rushed to the spot, and his nimble fingers were flying over, under and across each other like a flash. Blind to the charms of Miss Kitchen, Yank watched him for a moment, and then his own bearded lips unclosed.

"Call an expressman, Hannah!" he shouted.

Another moment and Nevermiss and the Modoc were retreating at a run, while the packages the former had held lay scattered in the dust with Miss Kitchen staring at them blankly.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### NEVERMISS TAKES THE TRAIL.

BEN BUCKINGHAM stood upon a ridge, leaning upon his rifle and looking thoughtfully away across the hills. The sound of horses' feet broke the silence, and then out of a gulch came two riders. They were Yank Yellowbird and Trail-Lifter.

He knew at once that something was wrong, for they were moving rapidly and their manner was unusually alert. The discovery was mutual.

"Hullo, thar, Benjamin!" cried Yank. "What've ye see'd?"

"Nothing."

"Ain't see'd nobody go this way?"

"No."

"Wal, by hurley, there has!" the mountaineer declared. "The atrocious insex has stole Zelda; I know it 'cause Still Tongue see'd 'em makin' off with her."

Ben hastened down the ridge to the side of the men and was soon in possession of all the facts of the case; though all has practically been told already. The Modoc had seen the men taking the girl away; he had hurried to notify Yank; and then they had taken the trail.

"By heavens!" Ben exclaimed, "I wish my horse was here!"

Trail-Lifter's peculiar whistle sounded shortly and sharply, and he slid from the saddle and motioned Ben to take his place.

"But you—what of you?" Ben asked.

"Let the Indian alone fur that," Nevermiss replied, "fur the critter kin run like a deer, by hurley. Inter the saddle, lad, an' say not a word!"

The rover needed no further urging. He obeyed; progress was resumed at a good rate of speed.

Trail-Lifter was not left behind; he ran with most surprising speed, ease and grace, and under other circumstances Ben would have thought it a wonderful sight to contemplate. Other matters claimed his attention, however. Zelda was in the hands of ruffians, believed to be Langleigh's tools, and every nerve must be strained to save her.

The trail soon left the more level ground and began to wind along the ridge where they could only proceed slowly. They went on resolutely, however.

Another hour had passed, and they were far east of Medicine Springs, when Yank suddenly stopped.

They had reached an open, almost level space, which ended at the foot of the cliff, and a few feet from the latter point they saw a log-cabin.

Nevermiss backed the horses well out of sight, and then crouched down in the bushes. His gaze became fixed intently upon the cabin, and though he volunteered no explanation, it was clear that he was decidedly suspicious.

Suddenly a man, who bore a rifle in his hands, came to the door of the cabin and looked searchingly around.

"Turk Tobin!" exclaimed Ben.

"To be sure. He's thar, an' you kin depend on't that the rest of the gang is thar—an' Zelda. Yas, they're thar, but they're wide-awake an' in a fort, so ter say. Now how be we goin' ter git at 'em?"

"I'll let you say."

Turk Tobin sat down on the threshold and laid his rifle across his knees; he had evidently been placed there as a sentinel, and his gaze commanded nearly the whole of the open space.

Yank beat a tattoo upon the breech of his rifle.

"It would be the easiest thing in the world," said he, "ter drop that chap whar he sets; a beginner couldn't miss at this distance. Now Turk Tobin wouldn't hesitate at all ter shoot, ef he was hyar, an' one on us was thar, but I won't shoot the varmint in cold blood. The Yellowbird pedigree don't show no murderers in the family, an' it never will unless one o' the race is fool enough ter change his name ter Canary."

"If we advance on the cabin," answered Buckingham, "I think the enemy will shoot us."

"To be sure they will."

"Then how are we to manage?"

"That's the idee. How? We can't cross the open unseen, an' ef we charge, we may all git dropped on the way."

"Do you think Zelda is in the cabin?"

"I consait she is."

"Then we must rescue her somehow."

"Yas."

"I am ready to work, Nevermiss, but I leave the way and means to you."

"Let me roominate."

Yank began to stroke his beard meditatively, but at this juncture Trail-Lifter laid a hand on his shoulder. The Modoc's eyes were gleaming, and he pointed to the cliff beyond the cabin. Then his nimble fingers flashed a silent message to the mountaineer.

"I dunno 'bout that," replied Yank.

"What is the idea?" asked Ben.

"He suggests that he go ter the top o' the cliff, an' then climb down an' create a divarsion in our favor."

"The cliff looked impassable to me."

"'Twould be ter you an' me, mebbe, but this Modoc kin go whar a mountain goat or a cat wouldn't dar' venture."

Again Trail-Lifter's fingers formed a message.

"He sez he kin do it, easy," added Yank.

"Wal, let me roominate on that p'int. S'pose he does git down—with his bones whole an' in place—what then?"

"If we had a lasso, we could all descend."

"We ain't got the lasso. Wish we had, by hurley!"

Several minutes of discussion followed, and the Modoc's plan grew in favor. It seemed to be the only one open to them except to make a bold charge, and this was too reckless to be entertained except in an emergency.

If Trail-Lifter could gain the rear of the cabin he could probably learn the exact situation inside, inform Yank by means of signs, and then proceed as was thought best when the time came.

"I reckon he will hev ter do it," observed the veteran.

"I only hope he won't fall and break his neck."

"He won't do that."

"He will certainly run great danger, and I only consent to it as a *dernier ressort*."

"It is a darn resort, but he's ekul to it."

The Modoc glided away. For a moment his footsteps were audible; then all sounds died away.

Buckingham fastened his gaze upon Turk Tobin, with occasional glances toward the top of the cliff. Tobin had produced and lighted his pipe, and he might have had a very peaceful air had it not been for the rifle which lay across his knees.

Not another person was visible, but the men in ambush could not see the interior of the cabin.

A few minutes passed, and then Trail-Lifter appeared at the top of the cliff. He glanced down, then across the glade toward his friends' covert; and then without hesitation, began the descent.

To Blacklock Ben it looked more dangerous than ever; the cliff was almost perpendicular and smooth, and a fall would almost inevitably prove fatal.

The Modoc did not hesitate; neither did he act in a reckless manner. Somehow he found crevices for his hands and feet, and gradually worked down the cliff.

"He'll do it!" said Yank, exultantly.

"The man is a wonder," Ben admitted.

"Thar ain't another like him, nowhar. You'd orter be on the trail with him onc't, when it's life ag'in' life, an' death ter him that ain't cute an' crafty. Land o' Goshen! thar ain't a Sioux or Pawnee, or Apache or Kimanche, that kin give the boy p'int."

"I can well believe it."

"See!—he's gettin' 'most down!"

Trail-Lifter was certainly nearing the foot of the cliff. His form, darkly framed in the expanse of cliff, steadily sunk lower. Ben wondered at his skill, for at times his foothold seemed to be too weak for any real support; then he swung for a time with his whole weight upon his arms; but in some way, and without delay, he always found another crevice or projection and moved on his way with that surprising agility which reminded Ben of some expert sailor moving about the rigging of a vessel.

Through all this period Turk Tobin sat in the doorway and smoked in blissful ignorance.

Sitting there he could not see the cliff, nor the Modoc, but had he stepped two paces away he could have seen both.

Trail-Lifter touched the ground.

The situation now became more painfully interesting to Buckingham. What would the state of affairs enable the Indian to do? Could he gain a view of the interior of the cabin? There was a vacant space of some feet between the cabin and the cliff, but more than that the watchers could not tell.

The Modoc disappeared, and there was a long interval during which Ben and Yank could only see the guard at the door. The rover grew uneasy—even nervous—but Yank was like a sphinx. His expression was calm and placid, and though he watched intently, there was nothing to tell of mental disquiet.

Ben found the silence painful, and was on the point of breaking it once more when there came a startling interruption.

Without the least warning, scream after scream sounded from the cabin—the cries of a woman in peril or great fear. A more startling occurrence at that time could hardly be imagined, and it acted like magic on the men in ambush; they leaped to their feet as though operated by springs.

As they did so a dark form flashed directly over the top of the cabin—it was Trail-Lifter. Turk Tobin had started up, but in another moment he was beaten down by the Modoc's weight.

The Indian's hand rose clutching a revolver;



it fell, and Tobin's head was the recipient of a blow delivered with all the mute's strength.

Another instant and the latter darted into the cabin.

Not a word spoke Yank and Ben, but they rushed at full speed across the open space. Trail-Lifter had set an example, and they were eager to follow him, though the cries had died away as abruptly as they began.

They rushed to the door, and the scene which there met his eye baffles description. Three men were visible, all engaged in a desperate struggle; the Modoc was gallantly battling their enemies. The movements of the trio were too rapid to be analyzed, but even then Ben was struck with the quickness and snake-like grace with which Trail-Lifter circled about in the arena.

Zelda was visible, too, and she had seized a rifle with which she was trying to help her red champion.

There was the briefest kind of a pause, and then Yank Yellowbird shot over the threshold. Blacklock Ben saw him grasp the nearest foe; the next moment the fellow lay quivering in a corner where he had been flung by the mountaineer's strong arms.

Ben was anxious to do his part, but, experienced as he was in such struggles, he had not been able to strike a blow when it was all over—the third man was down, and Yank composedly sitting upon his person.

"I consait that we had better stop an' rest hyar," the veteran said, in his most placid voice.

Trail-Lifter stepped outside the cabin, lifted the man he had first attacked, bore him inside and laid him down near the fellow in the corner. Both were insensible, or assuming to be. They were Tobin and Piper, while the man whom Yank was using as a chair was Abe Rooks.

The Modoc gave himself the task of watching Tobin and Piper, while his eyes gleamed more wildly than ever and his hands held a rifle tenaciously.

Buckingham shook hands with Zelda.

"I trust that you are not injured," he said.

"I am not," she promptly answered.

"You screeched," persisted Yank. "What was the cause on't?"

"That man, Rooks, tried to kiss me, and as I had seen Trail-Lifter, I called for help. If I hadn't seen him, I would have fought my own battle!"

Zelda made this declaration with spirit, but Yank turned his gaze upon Rooks.

"You atrocious insex!" he severely exclaimed. "I'd like ter know what mean caper you won't be in next. Seems that yer moral natur' is all twisted out o' shape. Pretty kind o' a varmint you be, ain't ye? You'd orter be too ashamed ter breathe the pure air, by hurley!"

"It's your turn now," sullenly replied Rooks.

"I consait it is, an' I don't need no one ter remind me on't. I'll improve my chance, too, or sell my skulp to a Digger Injun. Mister, it strikes me you an' me meet often. I've sat on ye before, an' you was in egregious mean business then."

"Go on!"

"Not much, I won't go on; I'm goin' ter stay right hyar until I philosophize a trifle. What you need is a stump speech, an' then a leetle moral persuasion. The latter I kin supply, an' will, though I ain't much on a stump speech. I knowed a lawyer onc't, in Kentucky, who could make a most eloquent stump speech. The sound o' his voice would yank the stump right outer the ground, an' when he got fervid an' affluent he'd thrill 'em with exstactick joy. You may not b'lieve it, but I've seen more'n ten thousan' stumps dancin' a waltz, or poker, or short-ears, around him."

"See hyar, you old blockhead!" roared Rooks. "I kin stand ev'rythin' but yer infarnal talk. Let me off on that, an' I'll never forgit it."

"Possibly ye won't forgit what I'm goin' ter substitute fur it, which is moral persuasion. That's what ye need, fur you've got an egregious bad natur', Rooks. Thar was suthin' wrong 'bout yer pedigree, I consait; a man can't be no good 'thout he's got a good pedigree. 'Twouldn't s'prise me at all ef you're descended from Captain Kidd, Pompus Pilate or Bluebeard by hurley!"

Yank changed the direction of his gaze.

"Benjamin, jest relieve Still Tongue, an' watch them two downfallen insex, will ye?"

Buckingham obeyed. He suspected that Tobin and Piper were conscious, and, receiving the rifle from the Modoc, stood guard over them diligently.

"I'll leave you an' the rest hyar," Yank pursued, "while Still Tongue an' I take Mister Rooks ter the wood an' exercise him a bit."

"What are you goin' ter do?" the villain asked, turning pale.

"I'll lustrate, d'rekly. Come on!"

The prisoner was lifted upon his feet and marched beyond the clearing, and then tied to a tree with cords secured at the cabin. When Yank began to cut some slender bushes and trim them into rods, Rooks became paler than ever, and his voice arose in rage and protestation.

"You kin save yer breath until I begin ter

lay on," Yank coolly replied. "You can't git out on't, an' you may thank yer lucky stars that you git off so easy. You'd git Judge Lynch arter ye in most settlements, by hurley! Who stole inter my hut ter stab Blacklock Ben when he's asleep? Abe Rooks! Who stole Zelda? Abe Rooks! Who's did a pile o' other egregious mean things? Abe Rooks! Who's goin' ter git the rod o' correction over his back? Abe Rooks, by hurley!"

Yank spoke with emphasis, and he proceeded to carry out his plan. Rooks's clothing was kept on, but when the rods were applied with the full strength of the veteran's long arm this did not serve to save him. He was chastised in a thorough way, and though the intervening garments prevented any laceration of the flesh, he suffered a degree of bodily pain, as well as humiliation of mind, which Yank saw with great satisfaction.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### MUTTERINGS OF REBELLION.

YANK YELLOWBIRD composedly returned to the hut.

"I don't see as thar is any use o' our stayin' hyar any longer," he observed. "I've properly argued the case with Abe Rooks, an' we'll leave him tied ter ther tree, an' let these two atrocious insex in the corner let him loose."

"Are Tobin and Piper to escape punishment?" asked Buckingham.

"They've both got a clip."

"A mere trifle, when we consider their crime."

"To be sure, but what be we ter do? I consait that you don't a'prove o' slayin' 'em in cold blood, while as fur arrestin' 'em, what good would it do in Big Medicine? They're Nelse Langleigh's tools, an' he runs the town."

"You are right," acknowledged Ben, with a frown.

"The only way is ter let 'em go."

"But what will Langleigh say when he knows of our day's work?"

"Very likely he'll storm like a blizzard on the rampage."

All this had been said in low tones, so that Piper and Tobin, if conscious, could hear nothing, and Yank now glanced at the ruffians and sunk his voice still lower as he added:

"I don't mind sayin' ter you, Benjamin, that things is nearin' a focus at Big Medicine. Nelse Langleigh has had his grip on the throat o' the town, but a strong opposition ter him has been gradooally growin' up. It's pooty generally understood that his egregious b'ilin' 'stablishment is a fraud, an' the spring-water not wuth a bit more fur medicine than any other water. The hull atrocious thing is a humbug, with Langleigh, Montclair an' Todd leagued tergeth ter swindle ev'rybody. Honist folkses know this; the current ag'in' the b'ilers has got in motion; I've been settin' the kickers on; an' when we git back ter town we'll stir 'em up some more. Thar is bound ter be a mutiny at Big Medicine, an' the Vampire Clique will hev their hands full ter put it down."

"I am glad to hear this, and you can rely upon me to aid in the rebellion."

"I know it, an' I'll be right glad o' yer help. You, an' Still Tongue an' me will make a small team, anyhow."

"Trail-Lifter! You do well to mention him; my admiration of him grows every hour. Modoc, your work in this case was excellent."

"Yas, you did wal, Still Tongue; you did very wal; you did most mighty wal, sir!" Yank asserted.

The young Indian received this praise with a grave gesture and unmoved face, but a brighter light in his dark eyes showed that he was not proof against such encomiums.

The party at once left the place; the horse which had borne Zelda to the cabin was appropriated for her use; and the return to Medicine Springs was begun.

As they went, the girl told how she had been captured. When she avowed her ability to care for herself, she had based her estimate on her previous success. For three years she had lived alone, and whatever danger appeared had been promptly and successfully met. She believed that she could continue to care for herself, and, perhaps, she would have done so only that she was taken by surprise.

When she returned from the interview with Morincy, she had found Bunker's men concealed in her cabin; they had taken her unawares, captured her before she could make any resistance, and carried her away as has been told.

"One thing is sartain," declared Yank, when her story was told, "you mustn't try ter live alone no longer, until the Vampire Clique is crushed out."

"Where can I go?" she asked.

"Ter Hannah Kitchen's house!"

Buckingham's gaze turned toward Yank's face; he met the regard of the mountaineer, and the latter seemed somewhat embarrassed. Ben, however, was perfectly calm, and no shadow of jealousy crossed his face at the thought of Zelda going into the same house with Julian Morincy.

Shifting his gaze, however, he saw that Zelda

was also regarding him earnestly. He smiled slightly.

"A good plan, I should say," he commented.

"The best o' places," warmly added Yank, with evident relief. "Miss Hannah kin care fur her, an' Zelda can console Hannah when that estimable female's inside bein' gits out o' kilter an' goes to runnin' on poetry, Canaries, fryin'-pans an' sich."

"Yes, and Morincy will be there to protect her," composedly remarked Ben.

"To be sure—to be sure!"

The mountaineer took another look at Ben. Was there any hidden meaning in the latter's words? The rover had seen Zelda and Morincy walking together in a very friendly, confidential way. What inferences had he drawn from that?

Yank could not tell, but he managed to rally after a brief pause.

"It's the duty o' ev'ry man," he said, "ter be a defender o' woman; an' it's lucky she has somebody ter stan' up fur her. A woman has more triberlations and distresses goin' through life than a yeller dog has hairs. Triberlations comes nat'ral ter most women, an' one who don't git her share gits mad an' makes 'em. I knowed one woman who was born lucky, an' never had no troubles. Was she happy? I consait not. She was jest miser'ble an' she started out prospectin'. She sampled ev'ry kind o' trouble knowed on this 'arthly sp'ear, an' then, when thar wa'n't no more, she jest pined away an' died 'cause her happiness made her so miser'ble."

By this time the more elevated part of the hills was passed, and the travelers put their horses to a gallop in the smoother ravine, and rapidly approached Medicine Springs.

On their arrival, Yank took charge of Zelda, and conducted her to Miss Kitchen's residence. That the latter received them warmly need scarcely be told; she declared that it would be a pleasure to take Zelda for Mr. Yellowbird's sake, and also suggested that Yank remain there himself, to protect the half-blood girl.

The mountaineer declined this offer, however, and took his departure before the maiden lady could allude to the advisability of a change in his name.

He rejoined Buckingham, who had waited a short distance away.

"Night is close at hand," the veteran said, abruptly, as he came up, "an' I reckon that we had better git supper an' then stir ourselves ter start the insurrection. When Abe Rooks an' his chums git back an' tell their story thar will be an egregious uproar among Langleigh an' his critters, an' we shall be the objects on't."

"Beyond doubt."

"Thar's plenty o' fun ahead, I reckon."

"There can be no 'fun' between me and Langleigh. We meet now, and always, as deadly enemies."

"To be sure."

"There is, I may frankly say, more between us than you naturally suspect."

"Nat'rally, or not, I suspect a good 'eal, though I don't claim ter know the facts. You hev your secrets, an' I hev mine."

"I am well aware of it," Ben dryly replied.

Yank started slightly.

"Dunno as I understand ye, Benjamin," he observed.

"I dare say we shall both explain by-and-by."

"I sartainly hope so, ef thar is anythin' ter tell, but I haven't an egregious thing."

"Not two minutes ago you said that both you and I had our secrets, friend Yank."

"Did I? Did I, reelly? I think you misonderstood me, Benjamin. I am suffrin' with the newrol'gy severely now, an' it nat'rally affects my speech; can't speak plain ter save my moccasins. However, I'll brace up an' wax eloquent when we git ter excitin' the folks ter rebellion."

"What is your plan?"

"Simply ter see 'em, an' tell 'em the latest. Zelda is only a half-breed, it's true, but she's a legal voter in this town, havin' lived here over a year, an' she's got the good-will o' the honist folkses. We'll make the stealin' o' her the rallyin' cry, an' you'll find it enough. Honist folks is stirred up a'ready, an' this will be the match in the powder. I consait thar will be an explosion."

"Suppose that Langleigh gets word of our operations?"

"He mustn't do it. I reckon I know jest who ter trust; anyhow, we won't trust nobody that ain't safe."

"Doubtful men are to be passed by, I suppose."

"To be sure. We won't talk with anybody we think can't be trusted, an' ef the atrocious insex don't git wind o' our work it'll be all safe."

This programme was carried out. Yank prepared supper in the hut, and when it had been eaten, he and Ben went out on their errand. The mountaineer had made a careful study of the citizens of the place, and for his companion's benefit he made two lists of names.

A third party was marked as doubtful, and left out entirely. This included John Kirk, Agrippa Ames and other Langleigh employees who, though presumably honest, were so entan-



gled by their association with the leader of the Vampire Clique that Yank did not care to trust them.

The work began.

As quietly as possible they went from man to man and presented the case.

Langleigh, Montclair and Todd had long had their iron heel upon the neck of the town, metaphorically speaking. A good deal of money had come to Medicine Springs, but except for a slight gain to a few merchants in a small way, all had gone to the pockets of the league of three. This would always be so; it was part of a deliberate plot, and only prompt measures could overturn the tyrants.

They had been severe rulers. Bob Bunker, as sheriff, had been well aided by such creatures as Rooks, Tobin and Piper, and these men had absolutely terrorized the town. From the first, dark deeds had marked their so-called "legal rule," and a revolt would have come long before only that all had feared Langleigh and his men, and a leader had been wanting.

Yank Yellowbird was the man of the hour. He did not fear Langleigh, and his bold utterances thrilled the less confident men and made them eager for the stroke. There were a dozen personal wrongs, similar to the abduction of Zelda, to be avenged, and they were eager to break the relentless rule of the Vampire Clique.

It was freely admitted by all that the springs from which Langleigh had made so much money possessed no medical properties whatever. He had simply conducted a gigantic swindle, and the only deluded persons were his victims.

Knowing all this, the citizens listened readily to ideas tending to a revolt, and the movement, once started, bade fair to become resistless.

#### CHAPTER XXIX.

##### A SERIES OF STARTLING SURPRISES.

SHERIFF BOB BUNKER called at the Langleigh residence and was ushered into the presence of the master of the house by Abram. One glance at his face showed Langleigh that his subordinate was in a perturbed state.

"Well, what is it?" he irritably asked.

"The whole blamed thing has miscarried!" Bunker growled, as he sunk into a chair.

"Do you mean in regard to the half-breed girl?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said that they had seized her all right."

"So they did, an' they got her away ter the hills, an' put her in a cabin whar she was ter be kept fur awhile. That was all right; what folloed wa'n't all right by a durned sight. She was rescued by Yank Yellowbird an' his gang."

Langleigh's face turned white with anger.

"Always Yank Yellowbird!" he exclaimed.

"The critter is in all the mischief that's afloat," Bunker gloomily replied.

"And so they brought her back?"

"Yes."

Langleigh brought his clinched hand angrily down upon the table.

"Bob Bunker, that meddling fool must die!" he cried.

"Wait! You haven't heard the worst."

"What more?"

"Yank an' that infernal Blacklock Ben are mighty active this evenin'; they've been goin' 'round among the citizens, an' though none o' our crowd kin git onto the secret at all, I'll bet my head ag'in' a hat that thar's a riot ahead."

"A riot!" Langleigh echoed, blankly.

"Yes. Thar ain't no use o' mincin' matters; you an' me, an' all o' our crowd, is unpop'lar hyar, an' I've often suspected that the outside kickers would rise an' try ter overthrow us. I b'lieve that's jest what's on the books now."

"Then," cried Langleigh, fiercely, "rally our men, and crush the rebellion right at the start!"

"Boss," gravely answered Bunker, "they are five ter our one."

"Then what in the fiend's name are we to do? Shall we yield the bonanza we have here? The springs are making us all rich—are we to give it up tamely?"

"I've got an idee."

"Name it."

"You know that up at Rattlesnake Valley thar is a village o' Injuns—the outlaw tribe, they're called. They are the survivors o' the insurrection a few years ago, an' the main tribe banished 'em. Since then they've lived at the Valley, a sullen, fierce, exiled party—the Panthers, they're called. I've taken pains ter make friends with them, an' hev a good bit o' influence with them. Why not bring 'em down ter help us?"

Langleigh smote the table again.

"The very thing, by Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

"Ef I set out at oncet I kin get 'em here by dark ter-morrer night, an' once they be hyar we kin rule the town. Add the Panthers ter our force, an' we kin sweep Yank Yellowbird an' his gang out o' Cutwater Gap in a hurry."

"Do it!" directed Langleigh. "By all means, Bob, do it. Start for Rattlesnake Valley at once, and bring down the Panthers. Promise them liquor, blankets—anything that will excite their cupidity and attach them to our service."

"That was my idee."

"Go at once. See Rooks before you start, and give him charge of our forces."

"I will, an' you kin depend on him ter work with a will. His back is smartin' from a thrashin' Yank Yellowbird gave him, an' he'll be a bloodhound on the tall Hustler's track."

After a little more conversation, Bunker took his departure. He had been gone but a few minutes when Cecil Montclair called. The latter was attired in his best garments, but not in his happiest smile; he looked uncertain and doubtful.

"All ready for the wedding, I see," observed Langleigh.

"Yes; but can you say as much for the bride?"

"I have more hope than I had," Langleigh replied. "Imogene is certainly in a more quiet mood. I think my threats had some effect on her, and she has not defied me to-day. I told her that Brainard would be here, and that she must resign herself to marriage with you. She actually smiled, and said that perhaps it would be best so."

"That's good news, if true," said Montclair, thoughtfully. "Has the parson come yet?"

"No, though I expect him every minute. It is a rather long ride from Red Rock, anyway."

"Suppose Imogene rebels—do you think Brainard is made of the right stuff to help us through?"

"I believe a hundred dollar bill will buy that fellow, body and soul."

"Good! If he proves pliable, why can't we add one more attraction to Cutwater Gap, settle Brainard here, and help our schemes by having a church and a parson? The worst kickers at my hotel are the female patients you treat at the Bathing Establishment, but if a parson tells a woman to swallow the moon for a ripe plum, she will inevitably make a try. I say, settle Brainard here."

"The idea will be worth considering if we can tide over a calamity which now threatens us."

"What is that?"

Langleigh explained Bunker's fears of a local rebellion, and the steps they proposed to take to crush it. Montclair, however, made light of the matter, and refused to see anything alarming in the situation. Even if there was an uprising, a volley from Bunker's men, leveled at Yank and his two associates, would banish the last atom of vitality in the movement.

"You are over-sanguine," replied Langleigh. "If you have studied the record of the man Yellowbird you must know that he is a bad person to have against one. 'Tis said he got his sobriquet of the Hard-crabble Hustler by in some way saving a town against odds, and the Indians call him Nevermiss. Plenty of men can be found who believe that lank mountaineer bears a charmed life, too."

"He is a meddling fool, and must be disposed of."

A knock at the door interrupted them, and then the Reverend Mr. Brainard was ushered in. He was cordially received by Langleigh; a chair was obsequiously placed for him; and when it was learned that he occasionally did indulge in "something to drink," a really excellent wine was placed before him.

Then the master of the house continued to make himself agreeable—and sound the reverend gentleman. He soon came to the conclusion that Mr. Brainard would not let any mere scruple stand in the way of earning a hundred dollars, which was the sum, Langleigh mentioned casually, he proposed to pay.

Both the schemers began to think that Imogene would surely become Mrs. Cecil Montclair that night.

Langleigh finally excused himself and went to the girl.

Imogene had not been out of the house, as far as her father knew, since he declared her a prisoner, but she had borne her captivity quietly. She was calm now.

"The minister has come, Imogene," Langleigh announced, in a friendly voice.

"Has he?" was the indifferent reply.

"Yes. Are you ready?"

"I suppose so."

Her manner was listless, and he looked at her sharply, wondering if her mind was wholly right.

"You and Cecil will be very happy as man and wife."

"No doubt."

"Her mind is surely affected," thought Langleigh, "but that is all the better. I can keep my promise to Montclair, and I don't care what becomes of her when it's over."

Then he said, aloud:

"Well, let us go to the parlor; the minister is waiting."

She readily arose, and took the arm he grimly offered her. In this way they went to join the men in the other room. Langleigh led her in with dignity.

"Mr. Brainard, this is my daughter, Miss Langleigh," he announced.

The minister started a little, and then replied:

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Langleigh. You are, I suppose, to be the bride's-maid?"

"No, no," answered Langleigh; "this is the bride."

"The dickens it is!" exclaimed Brainard.

"Yes. Why do you look so surprised?"

"Do you mean that I am to marry her to this man?" and Brainard pointed to Montclair.

"Of course."

"Then I have reason to be surprised. Is this a Mormon town?"

"Certainly not. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because it was not a fortnight ago that I married this young lady to another man!"

Langleigh started back in incredulous surprise, while Imogene, finding her hand released, stepped back a pace and stood regarding him with a calm smile.

"What's that?" cried Langleigh.

The minister repeated his former statement.

"Impossible!" Langleigh declared.

"It is impossible for me to be mistaken," Brainard insisted. "Let your daughter speak for herself!"

All eyes were turned upon Imogene. The calm smile was still on her face, and she unconsciously drew up her fine form to its full height.

"It seems a pity to spoil your plans for a wedding, gentlemen," she said, in clear, deliberate tones, "but it is impossible for me to take a leading part in the affair, owing to the facts stated by Mr. Brainard. I am already married!"

Langleigh gazed at her in mute intensity. Surprise, dismay, and rage were expressed upon his face: he was utterly dumfounded, and if he had followed his impulse he would have gone to the cowardly extreme of striking the girl as she smiled into his face.

Suddenly a ray of hope appeared thereon.

"It is false!" he cried; "this is a plot between you two."

"Wrong," Brainard replied; "it is true. I'll swear that I married her as I say, and I never suspected that I was to-night called to marry the same woman until I saw her."

"I do not see as there can be any marriage," Imogene quietly added.

"By heaven!" cried Langleigh, "I do not believe it yet. If you are married, where is your husband?—who is he?"

"My husband," the girl calmly replied, "is named John Kirk."

"John Kirk!" gasped the baffled plotter.

"Yes; your employee."

"Didn't I tell you she favored him, when her horse ran away?" excitedly, but rather vaguely, demanded Montclair.

"Kirk!" again repeated Langleigh, in a sibilant voice. "The scoundrel!—the treacherous villain!"

"You forget, sir," said Imogene, coldly, "that he is my husband."

"Husband or not, I'll have my revenge. I allow no employee to come into my house as a thief. He shall pay dearly for this!"

"I have sent word to him that I was about to tell the secret, and I think he can care for himself. If not, Mr. Brainard is witness that you have made threats against him."

"My good friends," said the minister, hastily, "let us avoid all contention. This matter is past redemption; it is best to accept the inevitable, and bury all feuds."

Langleigh struggled to recover his calmness, and then answered:

"There will be no work for you here, Brainard. I will pay you for your time—pay you generously. As for you, Mrs. John Kirk, and here his voice broke into a bitter sneer, "you can go to your room as soon as you choose."

Imogene bowed with calm grace and withdrew without a word. The glances shot after her by Langleigh and Montclair were full of venom, but she did not seem to heed them.

Whatever the future might have in store for her, she had scored one emphatic triumph.

#### CHAPTER XXX.

##### THE STORM BREAKS FORTH.

THE next day was one of startling events. First came the news that Langleigh had had John Kirk arrested and lodged in a temporary jail, charged with having stolen five thousand dollars from him. The facts were soon made known. Kirk had left his place of employment, and Imogene had left her father's roof, but Langleigh had been alert, and the arrest had followed, Rooks acting as sheriff in the temporary absence of Bunker.

Every one knew the spirit which had prompted the arch-villain's last step, and the mutterings of rebellion grew apace. The people could submit to no more, and they rose in a body.

First they liberated Kirk, and then the hot-headed members of the party forgot the moderate counsel of Yank and Buckingham. Before the two latter suspected any danger, Langleigh's house, his Bathing Establishment, the Hygeia Hotel and Doctor Todd's office were all in flames.

Yank and Ben were troubled that such a thing should mar the uprising, and they gathered such men as they could to act as firemen. Seeing that all the other buildings were doomed,



they made a final stand at the bath-house, hoping to save that, at least.

It was the liveliest day ever seen in Medicine Springs, and the crowd cheered hoarsely when the flames were seen to have sure hold upon the doomed buildings, but there were doubts and fears in Yank's mind which he did not speak aloud in the presence of the crowd.

Inquiries were frequently made for Langleigh, Todd and Montclair, but not one of these men were visible; they had either fled to the hills or secreted themselves in the cottage of some sympathizer.

Yank Yellowbird was by no means at ease. The several fires had given the uprising a serious aspect, and though law, lawyers and trials were practically unknown things for fifty miles around, Langleigh would have cause for action against them if he saw fit, and could bring the power of law to bear upon them.

As far as he was concerned Yank cared nothing for this; as soon as matters were settled at Medicine Springs he and Trail-Lifter intended to start off on a long journey; but the villagers would not be equally safe.

Langleigh owned the town; he was rich; he was revengeful.

He would undoubtedly attempt a return blow.

The attempt to save the bath-house was a failure, and when the other burning building had fallen in, and gone to ruin completely, the laborers moved back from the intense heat of the Bathing Establishment and watched to see that follow suit.

Some excitement and a good deal of talk was occasioned when water burst out of the ground a few yards from the doomed building. The entrance to the conduit had undoubtedly been obstructed by foreign matter, and the water forced a new place of exit.

It was a striking proof of Langleigh's downfall.

When he erected the big building over the springs, and made the conduit to the river, he effectually shut the alleged curative water from the gaze of all save those who could, and would, pay him for the privilege of using it. Now the great Bathing Establishment building was a mass of flames, and the water was pouring out in plain sight, free to all who saw fit to use it in any way.

No one came to be healed. Those who looked knew that it possessed no unusual attributes, and they alternately scoffed at the bubbling liquid and heaped opprobrious terms upon the heads of those who had so long humbugged the victims who had filled their pockets.

When the roof of the building fell in, a cheer went up from the crowd. It seemed like the going of the last vestige of Langleigh's power, and there was scarcely a man there but had some personal grievance against the iron-handed ruler.

Besides these there were two late cases of no small importance—the false accusation against Kirk, and the abduction of Zelda—and a report had somehow started that Langleigh and his tools had done deep wrong to the Philip Templeton and his daughter, Vivian, for whom Abel Gault and the other officers had been searching.

No one seemed to know how this rumor had started, nor how well founded it was, and as Gault and his companions were away they could not be questioned.

The cheers which followed the fall of the roof had an unexpected result, however.

Men in the crowd suddenly became aware that some one was pushing them roughly to one side, and by the time they had fairly recovered their balance a man stood at the front, pale with rage.

The crowd recognized Nelson Langleigh, and a hush fell upon them.

The arch-plotter had never been more impressive than then.

"You scoundrels!" he hoarsely cried, pointing to the blazing ruins, "you shall pay dearly for this!"

No one answered.

"You have applied the torch to my property," he went on, his eyes blazing, "and this is my reward. I have helped you, only to have you turn upon me like venomous snakes. Medicine Springs was growing to be a prosperous town; it would have made you all rich. Stupid, ungrateful fools! see what you have done. The vengeance of Heaven will fall upon you for this day's work!"

Yank Yellowbird advanced two paces and, leaning upon his long rifle, composedly confronted the raging man.

"I'd draw it a trifle mild if I's you, mister," he said, quietly. "You mix facts an' fictions up with reckless prodigality—you do, by hurley! I'd like ter inquire whar the riches, an' the wine, an' the honey, o' this wealthy city has gone? Inter Nelse Langleigh's pocket! Thar ain't a man hyar only you an' yer tools that has growed rich. How did you git rich? By imposin' on the sick an' unfortunat', by hurley! By swindlin' the afflicted! By holdin' out hopes ter the deceased, an' halt, an' blind, that yer egregious spring-water never made good."

"I have the written statement of patients who have gone away cured!" hoarsely asserted Langleigh.

"To be sure, you hev. Folkse hev come hyar from onhealthy regions, an' from cramped-up cities, an' the pure air o' Cutwater Gap cured 'em. That's what did it—pure air. The water had no share in it, an' you know it. Change o' climate is always good for folkse, when they go from a swamp-hole ter high, healthy land like this."

Yank freed one hand, and leveling his potent forefinger at the object of his discourse, impressively added:

"You set up fur a public benefactory, do ye? Mebbe that's why ye charged John Kirk with bein' a thief! Mebbe that's why ye tried ter lure Blacklock Ben inter an ambush, ter be massacred! Mebbe that's why ye had Zelda stole! Mebbe—but I don't b'lieve it, ye atrocious insex. I was born with antipathies, and they will stick to me, by hurley!"

A roar went up from the crowd.

Yank's rude arraignment had expressed the minds of all, and their anger rose to white heat. "Down with the villain!" cried a voice.

"Lynch him!" added another.

"Hold!" shouted John Kirk, "let there be no violence. I will stand between the man and that."

"He's said that his old springs will cure everything," put in another man. "Give him a taste of his own medicine. Duck him in his cure-all water!"

There was another roar from the crowd, and a forward movement which the more temperate of the party could not check; Langleigh was seized by strong hands; there was a struggle and a splash, and the leader of the Vampire Clique was floundering in the spring.

Then the crowd fell back and began to jeer.

Langleigh was able to swim, and the power was necessary now. His feet did not touch bottom, and when his pale face arose after the first immersion, he made a move for land. His hands touched the earth, but it crumbled away and he went down. Twice he repeated the attempt, only to be foiled each time; the brittle earth would not bear his weight, and he fell back as often as he tried.

"This ought to be stopped," urged Kirk, who could not forget the relationship of the victim to Imogene.

"Right!" agreed the mountaineer, "we will hev him out."

"Hold on!" directed a big, bushy-whiskered man in a red shirt. Give me room, an' I'll go a-fishin'!"

He had secured a pole, and as the crowd fell back he extended one end to Langleigh, which the latter quickly seized.

"Pull him out!" directed Yank Yellowbird. "He's lost faith in the spring-water as a cure-all medicine, but, mebbe, it ain't good for sharks!"

The man with the pole heaved bravely, and out came the leader of the Vampire Clique. He was wet, muddy, and nearly exhausted, and at once sunk to the ground.

At that moment Ben Buckingham strode forward and seized the mountaineer's arm.

"Look!" he directed, pointing. "Ain't there something wrong?"

Yank quickly obeyed. Fifty yards away, Trail-Lifter was to be seen running toward them with the speed of a deer. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and his strange grace had never been more noticeable. He had not been seen before for an hour, having disappeared just after receiving private directions from Yank.

The mountaineer now ran to meet him. It was noticed that his expression had become deeply troubled, if not alarmed, and a hush fell upon the group.

The two met, and Trail-Lifter's fingers were seen to flash over and about each other with even greater rapidity than usual.

Suddenly Yank wheeled and strode back toward his friends. His unusually mild face had grown stern, and the light in his eyes was keen and suggestive.

"Men," he said, in an even tone, though his words were much quicker than usual, "we've got ter git out o' hyar on the jump. I tol' you the absence o' that atrocious insex, Bob Bunker, didn't mean no good, an' now I know it. He's on his way back, with a hull tribe o' egregious Irjuns with him."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed John Kirk, "tis the outlaw tribe—the Panthers!"

Nearly every one of his hearers started, and strong, bold men grew pale. They knew the outlaw Indians to be merciless, and though they might have fought their own way out, there were women and children to care for.

"They will massacre us all!" gasped a faint-hearted man.

"Not much, they won't!" said Yank, in a ringing voice. "Men, we hev a few minutes ter spare—hustle 'round an' collect ev'ry soul o' our party. Then look ter me ter find the way out o' this fix!"

#### CHAPTER XXXI.

##### THE MOUNTAIN REFUGE.

The alarm quickly spread, and great was the dismay throughout Medicine Springs. All understood what the coming of the Panthers

meant. Although the outlaw band had for some time been peaceful, their existence had been a constant menace to the towns of the white settlers.

As they had not lived exactly in the vicinity of Medicine Springs that town had known them only by reputation, but they knew what to expect.

The news struck terror to the hearts of the women, and though the men were prepared to make a bold fight, they felt that it would be useless, and that the Panthers would massacre all, male and female.

Indignation burned more strongly than ever against Langleigh, for no one doubted that he had sent for the red outlaws, and if he had not wisely disappeared, he might have received a more forcible illustration of their feelings toward him than had before been given.

Yank Yellowbird had given the word that all should hasten to the hills, but it required all his efforts to get the party started. They ran about in great confusion, and seemed utterly to have lost their heads.

In this crisis Buckingham and Kirk came to the front as helpers, and excellent aid they gave. Somehow order was brought out of chaos, and the start was at last made. There were not enough horses for all, but the women were duly supplied, and such of the men as could be with the scant remainder.

Trail-Lifter had again vanished, having been sent out by Yank in the direction from which the red outlaws would come. Yank, himself, proposed to act as a rear-guard, and at his earnest request, Buckingham was allowed to keep him company.

A man named Hastings was selected as the leader of the fugitives, and definite directions were given him by the mountaineer. Of the party several were those before mentioned in these pages, noticeable among them being John Kirk, Julian Morincy, Imogene, Zelda and Hannah Kitchen.

Buckingham knew that Imogene would be kept near her husband, and he seized an opportunity to speak to Morincy.

"I should be glad," he said, "to have you and Zelda go together, and keep near Kirk. To that end I have secured a horse for you, as well as for Zelda."

"I will endeavor to take care of her," Morincy replied, his hand falling to his revolver.

"Kirk," the rover pursued, "is a cool, clear-headed man; you can have no better companion than he."

"I think you are right."

"Be careful, too, not to stray from the main party. There is no knowing what danger you might meet."

Morincy's color noticeably increased.

"I trust that you do not think me a child, Ben."

"Not by any means, but you have Zelda in your charge. For her sake, be careful."

"You connect Zelda and me persistently."

"I know that you and she are friends—and I am glad of it. Ah! they begin to move; ride on with the others. Be prudent, Monsieur Morincy, for when we unite in the mountains we don't want any one missing."

The flight was begun, the horses being put to a trot. All the men who had been unable to secure horses followed at a run. When they grew weary the pace must be moderated to accommodate them, for there must be no division.

Buckingham and Yank brought up the rear, moving at a walk. As they passed the last building of the village the mountaineer paused and looked back. The various fires were still blazing, and smoke hung heavily above the place.

"Big Medicine's day o' glory is past," observed Yank, seriously. "Cutwater Gap don't offer no inducement ter settlers, now the fraud o' the egregious springs is laid bare, an' it never'll bloom out ag'in. It's a melancholy pictur', by hurley, but Nelse Langleigh brought it on hisself. Can't shed a solitary tear fur him, though I've got a bone ter pick with them who fired the buildin's, when I hev a chance."

"I am not sorry it was done," Ben answered.

"Nor I, in one sense, but I hate ter hev an uprisin' in which I take part marked with bloodshed or burnin's. It's done, though, an' now we must look out fur the Panthers."

"To what degree need we fear them?"

"I consait we needn't be afeard at all; I ain't, an' I sha'n't be unless it's my left foot. Posserbly the weak sister may git skeered an artom."

"What I want to know is, what chance do we stand in a fight against them?"

"Wal, Benjamin, I'll admit thar are prob'ly a pile o' triberlations an' distresses ahead on us, fur the Panthers will fight like hurley. They're keen on the scent, too, an' we shall hev ter strain ev'ry narve, an' perhaps more than that, ter beat 'em. Ef you an' I, an' Still Tongue, was alone, I'd laugh at the atrocious insex, but with helpless women along our chances ain't quite so promisin'. Still, I don't admit they kin whip us; the Yellowbirds are hard ter lick, ef I do say it. Nobody ever got the best o' my father until Death tackled him, an' then he won two falls out o' five."

The village was soon left behind; the foothills



were duly passed; and the ascent of the mountain was begun.

The fugitives, moving upward, looked like a long, writhing serpent.

Yank's spirits noticeably improved when it became evident that the Panthers would arrive too late for an immediate attack.

When half-way up he deviated from the trail, and Ben followed him to a prominent ridge. Yank shaded his eyes with his hand for a moment, and then pointed to the northwest.

"Look!" he said, tersely.

The rover obeyed. He had no reason to ask for an explanation of the direction. Down among the ridges beyond the village, but now within half a mile of it, he saw a black area which speedily resolved itself into horsemen moving rapidly southward.

Even at that distance he could see that they were white men.

"The Panthers!" he exclaimed.

"To be sure," Yank quietly answered. "You hev named the atrocious insex correctly. We didn't git away any too soon."

"I do not forget that only for your judgment we should have had this merciless gang down upon the village without any warning, Nevermiss."

"I knowed the absence o' Bob Bunker meant somethin', an' I studied the rest out. Look at the critters!"

"They are coming at full speed."

"Yes. I consait they think they'll take the village on'wares. So they can, but we're wal out on't."

"Where is Trail-Lifter?"

"Som'ers on the line—he'll look out fur hisself, the Modoc will. No Panther kin gobble him."

The advance of the red outlaws was watched awhile longer, but, as they neared the village, Yank suddenly aroused.

"We'll go on," he said. "Trail-Lifter will bring us a report, an' I want ter git our party under kiver."

"In a cave?"

"That's the idee exactly."

The ascent was resumed, and at the end of fifteen minutes they overtook the fugitives. All had collected in a small depression, according to the mountaineer's directions. A quick glance showed Ben that Zelda, Imogene, John Kirk and Moriney still made a group.

"Now foller me," said Yank, cheerfully. "You needn't mind about yer trail, fur I expect that ter show. Simply foller me, an' I'll lead yer out o' the wilderness, as Pharaoh did the children o' Moses."

With this encouraging promise he started on, and for five minutes they wound around in the wildest part of the hills. Then he led them into an opening in the cliff which might have been a railroad tunnel, as far as looks and dimensions were concerned. It speedily widened, however, and they were in the cave where Yank proposed to shelter the party for the present.

It was a dark, dismal-looking place, but the mountaineer spoke in his most cheerful voice:

"Don't be afeerd o' the dark, fur it won't bite ye. It's old, the dark is, an' ain't got no teeth. We'll hev some pine torches as soon as Still Tongue kin git 'em, an' then you'll see it's a reg'lar palace. Tumble off yer hosses an' make yerselves ter home. Don't let the hosses stray out, an' take good care o' the provisions. We'll need the hull on 'em, fur thar ain't no pantry hyar, by hurley!"

Hannah Kitchen moved to Yank's side.

"I hope you'll protect me, Mr. Yellowbird."

"Protect ye! What from?"

"How know I what dangers lurk here?" and the maiden lady clasped her hands tragically.

"Don't think thar is any."

"There may be—oh! think on, Mr. Yellowbird!—thar may be snakes!"

"Or rats an' mice, specially mice. But don't be afeerd, Miss Kitchen; ef thar is a snake gits arter you, I'll wring his egregious neck—I will, by hurley!"

At this moment Trail-Lifter and Buckingham came in with a supply of pine-knots.

"Nevermiss," said the rover, "we are not to have a long reprieve. The foe is already on our track, moving up the hills."

"Let 'em come!" retorted Yank. "They'll find us ter home, I consait, an' they'll stay outside. They may be good-lookin', but they can't come in—I don't like their style. I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me. Start the lights, men, an' we'll illuminate an' look our castle over."

The direction was obeyed, and in a few minutes enough light was obtained to show all the fugitives the nature of their wild refuge. It was a strange and impressive place.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE FIRST ASSAULT.

THE cave covered an extent of two acres, but was by no means an open space. Nature had erected many pillars of rock to support the roof, and had been lavish in her work, some of the pillars being as large as a good-sized room. From these they dwindled in size to shafts too feeble to be of any actual strength.

These pillars made the place wild and fantas-

tic. They obstructed the view; they threw dark, forbidding shadows here and there, and gave to all a massive and grim aspect.

As a fortress it was well calculated, and if, as the mountaineer believed, there were but two entrances, it would be an excellent place from which to repel an attack.

"I'll leave ye now ter explore all ye want ter," said Yank, after a short time. "I want ter go out an' watch the signs o' the times. Trail-Lifter will go with me; the rest I want should stay hyar so thar may not be no egregious complerations."

The speaker glanced at his party critically. John Kirk was talking with Imogene, while Blacklock Ben, Moriney and Zelda made a second group.

Yank smiled quietly, and then turned and went out.

He found a spot to suit him, and looked down the mountain. The red outlaws had evidently visited the village, and finding it deserted, taken to the trail. They were now riding toward the mountain at full speed, and wilder riders he had never seen.

Nearer than the wild cavalcade he could see a few white men slowly ascending, and believed that he recognized Abe Rooks and Turk Tobin among them.

Certainly they were adherents of Langleigh's party.

At no time had Yank thought of secrecy. The cave was well known to half the men of Medicine Springs, and it would have been a waste of time to try and hide the trail.

It must come to an assault, and the sooner it was decided, the better.

On came the Panthers. He watched them from point to point—watched until he could distinguish Bunker, Langleigh and Montclair in the party. The foremost trailers were no longer making haste. Probably they had grown wary, and feared an encounter.

Nearer, and nearer yet; the foe was almost at hand. Yank fell back to a position near the entrance to the cave. He saw the Panthers leave their horses; he saw them reconnoiter on foot. Concealed by a thicket, he watched and studied, and when he saw a flag of truce being prepared, he made one more retreat and went to the cave.

There he briefly described the situation.

"The Modoc has not come in," said one of the party.

"I consait not."

"Won't he be captured?"

"Who? Trail-Lifter? Land o' Goshen! no—I'd like ter see the atrocious insex git a p'int on that injun. It can't be done! I see the flag o' truce comin', an' I want ye all ter hev yer rifles ready fur use, an' the women stan' wal back. Thar may be a charge, or a volley o' bullets inter the door."

Despite the last danger, Yank did not move away from the entrance. He stood looking out boldly, drumming upon the breech of his rifle.

"It's Bunker," he added, after a pause. "Somehow, Nelse Langleigh is a bit bushful about showin' his egregious head. Such modesty does him credit, fur he knows his deserts, an' is afeerd o' gittin' 'em. Benjamin, ef you want ter act as my second, come on. Bunker is anxious ter make a speech."

The mountaineer walked outside, followed by Ben. The sheriff had advanced quite near and come to a halt.

Yank went boldly forward to meet him, and nodded in a short, ungracious way.

"Wal, what kin we do fur you? Ef ye don't see what ye want, ask fur it."

"I am hyar," replied Bunker, "ez a representative o' the party o' men ye may hev see'd down yonder."

"You must be proud on't, by hurley!"

"They ain't burners o' buildin's!" retorted Bunker.

"No; part on 'em burn human fuel at the stake, an' the others murder old men, an' leave helpless gals in holes in the rocks ter starve."

Bunker changed color, and Yank leveled his long forefinger at the sheriff and forcibly added: "Ef it's you, I wouldn't bring up the matter o' pedigree—I wouldn't, by hurley!"

"Never mind," said Bunker, sullenly. "I've come on business, not ter palaver. You've done a big thing, burnin' the town, ain't ye?"

"Wal?"

"I am hyar ter arrest ye."

"Land o' Goshen! ye don't say so!"

Yank smiled genially and stroked his sparse beard.

"You're wanted, Yank Yellowbird, an' I'm goin' ter hev ye!" the sheriff declared.

"Will ye take me now, or wait till ye can git me?"

"You two men are wanted, an' thar ain't no sech word ez no. I want ter talk with a legal voter o' Medicine Springs. I demand the surrender o' you two, an' it'll go hard with the other folks in the cave ef ye ain't handed over ter us."

"What'll ye do, mister, ef I may make bold ter ask?"

"Give the word ter the Panthers, an' slaughter ev'ry soul in the cave!"

"Land o' Goshen! what a terrible chap you

be, Robert!" and the mountaineer held up both hands in simulated horror.

"On the other hand, ef you two are surrendered, we will go away an' leave the others."

Yank crossed his hands over the muzzle of his long rifle and, dropping his chin upon them, looked Bunker directly in the eye.

"Mister," he said, deliberately, "ef I'd been born as deep, an' wily, an' cunning, as you be, I wouldn't be satisfied with no sech lowly spear as sheriff o' a one-hoss b'ilin' town. Sech an abnormal development o' brain is extr'ordinary, by hurley!"

"What do you mean?" angrily asked Bunker.

"That your scheme is as transparent as water. What's the use o' foolin' around, anyhow? I speak fur my party, an' I tell ye nobody will be give up. I'm with this party ter fight, an' ef yer want ter see me do it, send on yer outlaw red-skins!"

"Depend on't, I'll do it."

"Ya-as, I consait so. Mister, do ye think I'm blind? All the while we're talkin' hyar yer Panthers are crawlin' toward the cave, hopin' ter take us by surprise. Let the atrocious insex crawl; my eyes are on 'em, an' the fu'st man who charges kin hev my compliments right from this bit o' iron!"

The mountaineer smote the barrel of his rifle, but at that moment a lithe figure bounded to his side.

It was Trail-Lifter.

The mute's fingers began to flash in the old way, but Yank did not wait for the message; the crawling Panthers had come too close to make further delay safe.

"Back ter the cave!" cried the veteran, in a quick, sharp voice. "Scud like the wind, Ben!"

He gave the rover a push, and though the latter was reluctant to lead the retreat, he found himself in that position, with Yank and the Modoc behind him.

Suddenly a war-whoop sounded from the adjacent rocks, and others followed like a magnified echo until the air seemed charged with the blood curdling sound. Ben glanced over his shoulder and saw half-naked savages leaping forward from all quarters.

Two or three rifles sounded. Ben was by that time inside the cave; he turned to see if his companions were hurt.

Yank Yellowbird stood in the entrance, his tall form erect, his usually mild eyes glittering. Suddenly his rifle leaped to his shoulder as though projected by machinery; it flashed almost before it had found its resting-place; and a brawny savage at the front of the assaulting party clasped his hands to his breast and fell, never to rise again.

"Rally, all!" shouted Yank, in a voice which rung out as clear as a bell. "Give the varmints a lesson! Don't let 'em git hyar alive, an' don't fire without aim."

Buckingham and Trail-Lifter fired simultaneously, and the other defenders took their stands.

The Panthers were coming like the agile beast from which they derived their name.

They came to a deadly reception. Those who held the cave were men skilled in the use of fire-arms, and the dismay which had prevailed at Medicine Springs was past; they fired rapidly, and with accurate aim.

The yells of the Panthers were certainly terrible, and their appearance was in keeping with their reputation, but they met a withering fire in that charge. Men fell thickly by the way, and there was no lull in the firing. Some of them almost reached the entrance, but this only exposed them to the aim of the revolvers. Not one could pass a certain point, and those who reached it never went back.

Human endurance, backed though it is with brute ferocity and courage, cannot stand everything, and the Panthers were made to feel it. They saw their ranks become thinned; they wavered; consternation seized upon them; they fled as readily as they had before advanced.

The first assault had failed.

"Back out o' sight, men!" said Yank, quickly. "It'll be a game o' sharp-shootin' now, ef we'll furnish targets, an' I consait we don't want. Keep out o' range."

Trail-Lifter cast himself down by a point of rock, and lay like a statue where his keen eyes could see all the region in front of the entrance.

"I believe that lesson will last them awhile," said Ben Buckingham, as he reloaded his rifle.

"It'll last some on 'em forever," Yank added, grimly.

"It was a bloody defeat."

"The world is better fur it, Benjamin."

"You are right; the Panthers can well be spared."

"Their screechin' was awful," observed one of the settlers.

"Their voices wa'n't the most melod'us I've heerd," Yank admitted, with his old placid air.

"As singers they can't compare with a gal I heerd in a theater at St. Louis. They called her a *prime dunner*, though what that means I dunno. Her voice was remarkable, though. At times she growled like a savage grizzly; then she would imitate a hungry catamount; then a reg'lar Sioux war-whoop would git loose from her throat, an' the way she



rolled her eyes up an' made up faces was surprisin'. I thought at fu'st she wa'n't well, an' wanted ter go an' help her, but they tol' me she did it on purpose. I s'pose she did, but ef I strained her system as much as it did mine, I pity her, by hurley! Some o' the folks said she could frill like a nightingale, an' was master o' sev'ral octagons, but I must say she wasted a pile o' narvous force, an' the poor creetur's screeches rung in my ears fur a month arter. I never could b'ar ter see a woman in triberlation an' distress. Anybody hurt?"

No one reported an injury, and the mountaineer went around and gave an encouraging word to all. They had given the enemy a severe lesson, and it had put Yank in the best possible humor.

He even found time to ask Miss Kitchen if she would advise him to change his name to Canary, now that she had heard the singing of the besiegers.

Nobody knew better than he, however, that fresh trouble was liable to come before many hours. Night was settling upon the mountain, and it would be a wonder if the restless Panthers were content to let time pass in inactivity.

What scheme would be formed and tried during the interval when the besieged could see nothing beyond the mouth of the cave no one within could say.

Certainly, every hour would be one of keen suspense.

Darkness fell, and found the little band anxious, but brave and resolute. What would be their condition when another day dawned?

#### CHAPTER XXXIII. THE PANTHER'S KNIFE.

YANK YELLOWBIRD proved his ability to command. He went about and saw to everything in the cave. Hasty as the flight had been from Medicine Springs, they had brought a supply of food and blankets along. He found the most desirable place for the women to pass the night, and saw the blankets arranged; he governed the distribution of provisions; he divided the men into sections, so that, if quiet prevailed, a portion could sleep while others watched, and no one remain on duty long enough to become sleepy and careless.

When all this had been done, he addressed his followers.

"I'm goin' out," he said, briefly.

"Outside the cave?" echoed Kirk.

"To be sure."

"You will be killed!" declared a settler.

"That don't foller; I consait I shall come back all right. Anyhow, I'm goin'. It ain't right ter be in ignorance o' what the atrocious insex is doin', an' I'm willin' ter run some risk ter know."

"But they are probably watching the mouth of the cave."

"Let 'em watch. I'm goin' out o' the other exit, an' I doubt ef anybody but Trail-Lifter an' me knows on it. It's a narrow hole in the rocks, an' I reckon I kin pass it all safe; in fact, I know I kin. Don't worry about me; thar never was but one o' the Yellowbirds over-reached by an Injun, an' that was in a jumpin'-match, an' he was only an adopted son o' my grandfather's fourth cousin, anyhow."

It was plain that Yank was determined to go, and they opposed him no further. He looked carefully to his weapons, and left the cave by the way of which he had spoken.

The night was favorable for his purpose. There was no moon, and the sky was sufficiently overcast so that his movements would be well concealed.

He stood for a moment after leaving oover, and instinctively expanded his chest and drew in the fresh air. He was in the full sense a lover of Nature, and nothing else aroused his admiration so much as the rocks and trees of a varied landscape, the clear atmosphere and the far-reaching dome of heaven overhead. If the stars were visible there, he liked it better, for, in his quaint conceit, they were friendly companions who twinkled genially at him, but never quarreled.

Not long did he stand inactive; almost as silently as a specter he glided toward the north. There he expected to find the besiegers encamped.

He was not mistaken.

In a depression he saw three large fires blazing, and about them were seated the men. He soon made out that two were surrounded wholly by the Panthers, while the white men kept apart by the third.

It was not a silent camp, nor were the Indians acting the grave warrior in the least. The scenes about their fires were so like a drunken carousal that Yank shook his head slowly.

"Them as think they are pleasant comp'ny can keep sech," he muttered, "but, by burley, ef I was Nelse Langleigh an' his crew, I should expect to git my egregious skulp raised afore mornin'. 'Twould be a jest jedgment ef the Panthers went back on 'em!"

He studied the situation, and then, forming his plans, moved along again. By means of a *detour* and careful labor, he reached a ledge which rose to one side of the fire around which were grouped the white men.

Screened in the bushes which found root in a thin layer of earth, he looked down at them.

There were many familiar faces there, noticeably those of Langleigh, Montclair, Bunker, Rooks, Agrippa Ames and the detectives, Gault, Chickering and Wing. The presence of the officers disgusted the mountaineer; it seemed that they were completely under Langleigh's thumb, and he did not doubt that the arch-schemer would seize every chance to poison their minds.

The first words he heard were, singularly enough, in confirmation of this theory.

"We are, of course, glad to have you with us," Langleigh was saying, as Yank became motionless.

"I admit," replied Gault, "that if duty did not send us here, we would leave confounded quick."

"Why so?" asked Langleigh, with manifest uneasiness.

"What of your allies, the Indians?"

"Not the most desirable persons, I grant, but the best we can get, just now."

"I hate to be in a case upheld by such men," Gault explained, "but that is not what I mean. Detectives often have to keep strange company, you know. What I do mean is something quite different. Are we safe with those howling demons around us?"

"Why not?"

"They look bloodthirsty and untamed, and I wouldn't trust one of them in the least. What if they should massacre us? They look equal to it."

"I think we can control them."

"If they see fit to go for us, we haven't a ghost of a show. I am not a coward, but I don't trust them in the least, and they are eight or ten to our one."

"We are better armed than they."

"Humph! A park of artillery would not save us if those demons let themselves loose!" and Gault looked nervously toward the boastful Panthers.

"Remember that we need not sleep to-night—"

"Rest assured, I shall not!"

"And that we attack the cave again just before daybreak. I am confident that this attack will succeed. We will carry the place by storm and then you shall have Yank Yellowbird as your own at once."

The listening mountaineer suddenly grew more interested; his own name had a familiar sound, and he was anxious to know why Gault wanted him.

"I have had some words with the Hustler from Hardscrabble," said the detective, musingly, "but I find it hard to believe he is a villain."

"He has conducted himself like one around Medicine Springs, and is, plainly, a thief, firebug and desperado. As to the case of Philip Templeton, Yellowbird confessed to Abe Rooks that he was the one who snatched the Templetons out of your hands that night. Beyond doubt the lank mountaineer has them in hiding now, or, worse still, has murdered both."

Yank unconsciously leveled his fore-finger at the unsuspecting speaker.

"It's a blessin' ter you, you atrocious insex," he muttered, "that you didn't live in the days o' Adam Yellowbird, o' Eden City. I've heerd him tell that a woman named Lot was turned inter a pillar o' salt fur sland'rin' her neighbors!"

Langleigh and Gault continued their conversation, and it was plain that the former was doing all he could to poison the officer's mind against Yank. Gault, however, was so worried by the antics of the Panthers, who would occasionally send forth a wild whoop, that he was unable to fix his attention firmly.

His fears were manifestly shared by Chickering, Wing and Agrippa Ames—indeed, the frequent glances of the latter up the rocks led the mountaineer to believe that he meditated desertion.

Yank did not care to linger a great while, and after learning that an attack on the cave was really determined upon for the early hours of the morning, he beat a retreat.

None of the allies seemed to be stirring outside the camp, but he did not relax that vigilance which had become a part of his nature. It was well that he was on the alert in this instance.

He was passing a boulder when, without the least warning, a tall figure shot from the cover and a strong arm drove a knife straight toward his breast. The blade did not reach its human sheath; Yank leaped back with the agility of a cat, and the assailant, carried forth by the impetus of the blow, was brought directly in front of him.

He saw at once that it was an Indian, and he dropped his rifle and seized the man. As he did so the fumes of liquor were borne strongly to his nostrils, and he knew that the Panther was far from sober. It would not do, however, to allow him to send out an alarming war-whoop, and while the mountaineer compressed his throat with one hand, he brought the other sharply down on the red-man's arm.

The knife fell rattling among the rocks.

Another moment and Yank hurled the Pan-

ther resistlessly back against the boulder. He struck with great force, and then rolled over upon the ground and lay quite still.

Yank gazed at him for a moment, smiled grimly, and then pursued his way. He did not care to slay the man, especially as he had unconsciously done his conqueror a favor.

By this encounter the mountaineer had learned that the Panthers had a supply of liquor. With this disturbing element to aid their naturally ferocious natures there bade fair to be lively times in the camp of the allies before morning, and Yank was not so sure that the cave occupants need be afraid of Langleigh.

Still, if the Panthers did not fight among themselves, they would still outnumber the besieged, and they were likely to keep the campaign up, even if they cut loose from, or massacred, their white allies.

There was still great danger for the fugitives, but greater yet for Langleigh, if Yank judged rightly.

He returned to the cave as soon as possible, and was met at the entrance by Buckingham. The latter reported that all was quiet within, and the veteran then told what he had seen at the camp of the allies, and the conclusions he had drawn.

"Mind," he added, "I don't say thar will be any row thar, but it ain't safe ter give any band o' Injuns liquor like that; least of all, sech cut-throats as the Panthers. It wouldn't s'prise me ef they riz up an' licked Langleigh's lambs like hurley."

"It is a consummation devoutly to be hoped for."

"Yas, they had ought ter be consumed," Yank agreed.

"Nevermiss," Ben seriously added, "I have held my peace for some time, but I now have a question to ask you."

"Can't imagine what 'tis, but I'll hear it."

"Where are the missing Templetons?—Philip and daughter, Vivian."

Yank shook his head slowly.

"That is a puzzler," he answered.

"Not to you, friend Yank. You can answer if you will. This much I do know—I have met Vivian. She has been disguised to represent Zelda, and in this character I have seen and talked with her. It was Vivian who gave me aid when the grizzly attacked me in the mountain; it was she whom we conducted to the cave afterward. From that time I have not seen her masquerading as Zelda, the only Zelda I have seen has been the true one—she of the mixed blood."

Yank listened gravely to this address. A ray of light from the nearest torch fell upon his plain, rugged face and showed it quiet and composed. He leaned upon his rifle, and his tall form threw a dark shadow on the wall which quivered with the flickering of the torch.

"Benjamin," he slowly answered, "you're a man that kin be trusted, I feel sure, an' I don't mind sayin' that you are right. Vivian has at times taken the character of Zelda, bein' skillfully disguised, an' this is how it come about: One day when I's huntin' in the hills I heerd a woman's cries fur help. I went ter give that help, an' I found the pootiest gal I know on at the bottom of an egregious hole in the rocks, called Griffin's Well. That was Vivian. Of course I helped her out."

"How came she there?"

"Twas the work o' Nelse Langleigh, an' his sharks was the ones who put her in."

"I am not surprised. But what of Templeton?"

Yank shook his head.

"I'm afeerd he's dead. I can't git no trace on him."

"Where was he last seen?"

"Vivian saw him last when he left her at Montclair's Hotel, to go an' see Langleigh. Then came a blank ter her; she was drugged, ye see. When she came to, she was in Griffin's Well. Her father's fate is unknown."

"Where is Vivian now?"

The mountaineer started.

"Whar! Oh! I've consealed her—put her in a safe place, I hope. She may come back ag'in, some time."

"Nevermiss," answered Ben, with a smile, "you are not yet ready to trust me fully, but I want to say that I know as well as you where the girl is, this minute!"

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### A HAND-TO-HAND FIGHT.

THE mountaineer's gaze had wandered, but it came quickly back to Buckingham at the last words. His gray eyes searched the rover's face closely, and his own exhibited a variety of emotions which his tongue was not destined to express, for at that moment there was a rustling of woman's garments and Hannah Kitchen approached.

"The egregious female!" Yank muttered.

"I'll see you again, Nevermiss," said Buckingham, as he turned away.

"Don't be in a hurry," requested the veteran, but Ben walked on heedless of the words.

Miss Kitchen came up with her sweetest smile playing pensively over her face.



"Dear Mr. Yellowbird, I am so glad to see you safe back!" she murmured.

"'Tis better than ter hev my skulp danglin' at a Panther's belt," Yank answered.

"Horrible thought!" and the maiden lady clasped her hands tragically. "May I never live to see it!"

"See what—my beheaded skulp?"

"Oh! ah! Do not speak thus, dear Mr. Yellowbird. I want allers ter see you safe, an' that's why I am glad you're back safe. Now you are here, an' I am here, I feel a deep content, as though my soul was floatin' in Elysium bowers."

"Be you often took that way?"

"In your presence, yes."

"I'm afeerd you're goin' ter hev an atrocious attack o' newrol'gy. It allers begins that way; it did with me. Newrol'gy is an awful distemper, Miss Kitchen, an' when it gits ter goin' with full malev'lence, its egregiousness is awful. I've had it so my jints would snap so loud that you'd think a rig'ment o' riflemen was praticin'."

"I am so sorry you are troubled with neuralgia," murmured the lady.

"So be I; you may not believe it, but I be."

"Thar is other hurts than those of neuralgia."

"To be sure, thar is. 'Member distinctly a man up in Wisconsin who had other hurts; he was blowed up in a powder explosion, an' when he came down he was scattered with prodigal profusion. When we picked up the pieces we counted three thousand an' one on 'em—he was bad hurt. When old Doctor Oxbow got thar Sam Ticknor sez ter him, sez he: 'Ycur skill is no good hyar; the man will die.' Now, the old doctor was an egregious obstinate man, an' he got his back up right away. 'Sir,' sez he, 'who set you up fur a surgeon? Whar's yer diplomacy?' 'Ain't got none,' sez Sam. 'Then,' sez the doctor, 'don't dar' dress me, ter say what I kin do, or can't do. Sir,' an' the doctor yelled so loud he brung in two p'licemen, 'I'll save this man or burn my diplomacy!' He did it, too, an' the victim got wal, though, as we never could find his back-bone an' left knee-pan, Oxbow had ter put in false ones. That's what ye might call a bad hurt, I consait."

"Ah! but thar is a wuss hurt than that—'tis the one made by Love's poisoned dart."

"It's an egregious mean thing ter shoot p'isoned arrers."

"I have felt the barb; it rankles here!" and Miss Kitchen pressed both hands over her heart.

"You'd better see a doctor, by hurley!"

"The only cure for me is tender, lovin' sympathy. 'Tis the pangs of unrequited love that rend my inner bein'. Dear Mr. Yellowbird, let us suppose a case. Suppose that a lady an' gent loved each other devotedly, but the gent did not propose. What course would you advise the lady ter adopt?"

"All would depend on sarcumstances. Lovers ain't like other men an' women; their senses are fur the time bein' in chaos an' havoc, an' they are ter be pitied, not harassed. Deal gently with 'em, an' not lacerate their inside bein', so ter speak. Ef you know any lady sitterated as you say, advise her to go off som'ers an' stay alone fur a few moons. She'll pick up egregiously."

"But time is fleetin'. Wouldn't it be better fur her ter speak right out ter the bashful lover?"

"No, no!—Land o' Goshen! no. Don't think on't—that is, don't let the 'maginary lady think on't."

"You have never felt the divine sovereignty o' love in your inner bein', I fear, but I have."

"I'm sorry; I re'lly be, by hurley. Brace up! Be a man—I mean, a hero! Take suthin' fur yer inside bein', an' git the newrol'gy out o' yer system. That's what's playin' havoc with ye, an' I know it."

"Oh! Mr. Canary—"

"Eh? What? Who?"

"Excuse me, I mean Mr. Yellowbird. And speakin' o' that, don't you think it would be wal for us ter abandon sech common, unromantic names as Kitchen an' Yellowbird, an'—"

"An' be Canaries? Not much, I don't. I ain't goin' back on my pedigree. I'll stick to Yellowbird, an' you'd better stick ter Kitchen. When we get out o' this egregious fix I'll send over a dozen fryin'-pans. An' now I consait I shall hev ter leave ye, fur I want ter hold a counsel o' war."

The mountaineer strode unceremoniously away. As he neared the main group of the refugees he saw Buckingham talking with Zeld, Imogene, John Kirk and Morincy.

He would have joined them, but the other men surrounded him, anxious to hear his report. He explained the situation fully, and then went on.

Buckingham at once addressed him.

"Nevermiss, I am requested by Mrs. Kirk, formerly Miss Langleigh, to make an explanation to you. She is so disgusted by Nelson Langleigh's conduct that she wants it plainly understood that she is not his daughter."

"So she casts him off? Wal, I consait she does right—"

"What I mean is, she really is not, and never was, his daughter. She learned it some-time ago, and sent for a detective to discover

just who she was. The detective has not yet learned, but it is clear that Langleigh is no relative of hers."

"She must be relieved ter know it, by hurley!" Yank declared. "I'd hate ter hev one o' the Vampire Clique in the Yellowbird family; there's a heap in havin' a good, clean pedigree, gal. I'd rather be the first o' my race, an orphin at, an' afore, my first 'pearance in the world, than ter hev a crooked ancestor. Once let an atrocious insex shoot out on the ginerology tree, and all the hatchets an' broadswords in Christendom can't lop him off."

"I am done with Langleigh," said Imogene, with spirit.

"To be sure. Wal, I hope the detective will git ye a new father, by hurley!"

Yank winked significantly at Blacklock Ben, while Kirk took up the thread of conversation.

"What are our chances, Nevermiss?"

"They improve a bit, lad. We're goin' ter hev a heated argument with the enemy in the mornin', an' ef we present enough cold facks, with plenty o' powder behind 'em, we shall undoubtedly carry the verdich in our favor."

Trail-Lifter approached, and his flying fingers communicated a message to the mountaineer.

Yank nodded shortly.

"He says things is gettin' a bit wild in the Panther camp, an' I consait he's about right."

"Let us hope it will continue," added Ben.

"I don't object. But see hyar, ain't nobody goin' ter bed? It's time."

It certainly was time if any one intended to retire, but none but the children seemed inclined that way. All felt that the night would settle the matter one way or the other, and the men preferred to be on the alert, rifle in hand, while the anxiety of the women made them anything but sleepy.

Yank, however, declared that they must look to their health, and after some argument he induced the majority to seek their blankets.

Whether they slept was another question.

The night-vigil then began for those the mountaineer had selected for that purpose. Guards were placed at the entrance—men who could be trusted in every way. Among them was Buckingham, and Yank, who occasionally moved about the cave, usually sat near him.

Conversation flagged, and the watchers sat there in grim silence much of the time. Blacklock Ben could not but notice Yank's position. He sat with his back to the rocks, his rifle resting between his knees, and moved so seldom that one might almost have thought that he slept. His eyes, however, were wide open, and were rarely turned away from the space in front of the entrance.

Not for a moment did his vigilance relax.

Trail-Lifter passed the night out of doors, and Ben knew that he was watching tirelessly.

The hours wore on; daylight drew near. If the attack came it must be soon. Yank arose and gathered all the men near the entrance. A breastwork had been made of rocks, and behind this the men lay down and waited as coolly as was possible.

Footsteps sounded outside, quickly and light. Trail-Lifter entered. All was dark there, and he could not execute his finger-telegraph, but he grasped Yank's arm with one hand and pointed outside with the other.

"The atrocious insex are comin'!" exclaimed the veteran quickly. "Ev'ry man be ready, but fur yer lives don't lift yer heads above the rocks; I consait they'll send a volley o' bullets in hyar as a starter. Keep cool, now, an' when it comes ter the pinch, fight like hurley!"

There was a pause, during which not a sound was to be heard within, or without, the cave. Then, as though lightning had flashed brightly, a light sprung up in front of the entrance; a shower of bullets whistled through the open space, or struck dully against the rocks; and the roar of many rifles combined told that the assault was begun.

Wild, discordant whoops followed, and then came the pattering of feet.

Dusky forms appeared in front of the entrance.

Yank Yellowbird gave one clear word of command. There was a rattling sound as the rifles were raised to the top of the breastwork, and then another sheet of flame sprung up—this time from the position of the defenders.

Those who had fired dropped down, or fell back, according as they had opportunity, and a second line of marksmen arose. They thrust forward their rifles. The muzzles almost touched the yelling Panthers.

Once more there was a flash, and those at the front of the assaulting party faded away as though by magic: the destruction was remarkable.

"Back!" shouted Yank Yellowbird.

Quickly the defenders retreated a few paces. Then a bright light flashed at the entrance. A quantity of powder had been scattered loosely on the floor; a man selected for the purpose had now flung a match upon it.

The new light brought the red outlaws into plain view, but left the position of the defenders almost wholly dark.

This was Yank's plan for using the revolvers

to advantage, and it was well improved. The weapons flashed with wonderful rapidity, and if one of the Panthers passed the breastwork it was only to fall just inside it.

But they were mad with a thirst for blood, and fresh men took the place of the fallen. The revolver-fire grew weak; some of the Indians passed the line of safety.

Yank uttered a clear shout and sprung forward with his rifle reversed to be used as a club. Ben Buckingham, with an effort, gained his side—he craved the honor of fighting shoulder to shoulder with such a man.

The rover found foes in abundance. He went at them with a shout; he struck out boldly; while all the while an inferno of sound, made of whoops, yells and shouts combined, rung in his ears.

Even then he found time to look about, and he saw that he was between Yank and Trail-Lifter. The work of the two amazed him. The mountaineer mowed a path wherever he went, while no one could stand before the strangely-agile Modoc.

And then the wave of battle seemed to roll away from Blacklock Ben; he paused with his rifle uplifted, for there was no foe to strike.

The Panthers had gone, defeated, decimated and humbled.

Yank Yellowbird turned and grasped the rover's hand.

"Hooray, Benjamin!" he exclaimed. "The scrimmage is oorn, an' the red insex is licked, all ter pieces. We've upheld the glory o' our pedigree, by hurley!"

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE DAWN OF DAY.

The gray light of morning moved to the mountain and cast the dark robe of night from ravine, ridge, rock and thicket. Another day had dawned, and it not only found the besieged in possession of the cave, but in far more favorable and prosperous condition than any one had dared hope.

Not one of the party had been slain during the fight, and though there were some bad wounds, none were considered fatal. It had been a remarkable escape, owing partly to their position, but greatly to Yank Yellowbird's generalship.

Better than all the rest, danger was now past. Yank and Trail-Lifter had done some scouting, and they announced that the remnant of the Panthers had beat a disorderly retreat. Just before daylight a bright blaze was seen in the direction of Medicine Springs, and when investigated, it proved to be from burning dwellings.

The Panthers had made their farewell a fiery one; they had applied the torch to the town, and every building was in the grasp of the fire-fiend.

Of Langleigh and his party nothing definite was known, but Trail-Lifter had told Yank that there had been fighting in abundance around the camp-fires before the last attack on the cave, and it was believed that these men had fallen victims to the red murderers they had recklessly attached to their service.

Thus it was that when day had fully dawned, Yank, Buckingham and the Modoc went out to investigate.

When convinced that they need not fear an ambush, they descended to the valley camp.

They found evidence of all they had suspected. The fires were dying out, and around them lay broken bottles and an empty whisky-keg. Here was the cause of victory and defeat. But something more was found; three bodies remained on the ground. All were at first thought to be lifeless, and such proved to be the case with two of the three. Sheriff Bunker and Abe Rooks were there, and both had been dead for hours. The third man still lived, although he was unconscious.

This was Nelson Langleigh!

Few words were spoken by those who stood by him; he had been an evil man, but they knew he was near the end of life, and when death stands over a mortal form all tongues may well be curbed.

"I want him carried to the cave," said Ben, quietly, anon.

"We sart'inly won't leave him hyer like a wolf," Yank gravely replied.

"The man holds secrets which I would be glad to have him tell. Lift him carefully, and convey him to the cave."

Trail-Lifter's whistle caused them to look up quickly; the Modoc was pointing up the ridge. They looked and saw four men advancing, the foremost of whom held his open hand toward them as a sign of peace.

They were Agrippa Ames, Gault and the other two officers.

"Don't regard us as enemies," said Gault, quickly, as they came nearer. "We are anything else."

"Only last night," replied Yank, gravely, "you was talkin' of arrestin' me."

"Only last night!" echoed Gault. "I feel as though I had lived a century during that time! You have no idea what has occurred here. The Indians, mad with liquor they stole in the village, murdered Turk Tobin. We four fled to



the coverts around here, but Langleigh, Bunker and Rooks remained. You see the result; the red fiends butchered them all!"

The speaker paused, shivered, and then added: "Don't ask us now to describe that terrible scene in detail, but let me tell you, Yellowbird, what I learned from Turk Tobin's lips before he died. I lost Philip Templeton and his daughter through Langleigh's treachery; he had a spite against Templeton; he had his tools capture and take them to the mountains. Templeton was murdered, and the girl left to starve in a place called Griffin's Well. She escaped, I know not how, nor do I know where she is."

"Then," said Yank, quietly, "I s'pose you won't arrest me."

"Arrest you! Man, all I ask is to get back East alive; I've had enough of this region. Were Philip Templeton alive, and standing before me this moment, I would not lay a hand upon him. All I ask is to get back East with my life!"

"Sech bein' the case, you kin go ter the cave with us. We are going ter carry Langleigh thar."

Yank, Ben, the Modoc, and Wing lifted the unconscious man. Gault, Chickering and Ames followed, and thus the procession went to the cave.

Their arrival created a commotion. Great had been Nelson Langleigh, and even in his fallen condition he exercised a measure of power. They gathered around him after he was laid upon a pile of blankets, and Imogene, forgetting all but that he was a human being, gave her aid to Yank to try and resuscitate him.

Blacklock Ben saw Zelda and Morincy standing aside, and went to them.

"You will no longer be telegrapher at Medicine Springs, monsieur," he said, to the Frenchman.

"No."

"There have been strange happenings of late, and Nelson Langleigh's death will greatly change all. That man, I will now explain, was one of my father's murderers, though Bunker fired the fatal shot. The deed was done in a stone building, where my father had an office, twenty years ago, and the body was barely saved from the flames, after they set fire to 'Granite Tower,' so called—indeed, I think they have always believed that it was consumed.

"For years, I, a mere boy, tried to learn the identity of the assassins. I failed; I became a professional detective, and was so successful that by some I was called 'The Secret Service Sleuth.' At last I gained a clew as to my father's murderers, and resigned my official position.

"Just as I was about to come to Medicine Springs I received a letter from a lady who wished to employ me in a professional way. Thus I came here in a double capacity, and ever since my arrival I have been at work. Now that I have confessed, have you no explanation to make?"

The rover looked steadily at Morincy, who flushed deeply and looked confused.

"What can I say?" he asked, in an almost inaudible voice.

"Since you ask me," replied Buckingham, in a grave voice, "I would suggest that you form your statement in words like these: I am not Julian Morincy; my real name is Vivian Templeton."

The color receded from the telegrapher's face, and in its place came a striking pallor, while those dark eyes were filled with a startled light.

"Why are you alarmed?" Buckingham gently continued. "I have known this for days. I saw you twice when you were disguised as Zelda. I penetrated the truth when I saw you and the real Zelda walking together, but in no way have I betrayed your secret. Do you fear to trust me now?"

The color came back to the telegrapher's face, and a plump, brown hand was extended to Blacklock Ben.

"No, no," answered the girl—Morincy no longer; "I do not fear to trust you. I know how noble you are. You have surmised rightly; I am Vivian Templeton."

"Thank you for your confidence," said Ben, earnestly, "and now I hope you will allow me to be your defender in any danger which may occur."

"I can ask no greater good fortune," Vivian murmured, with downcast eyes, "but I beg that you will not expose my identity—my sex—to others. Only Zelda and honest Yank know it now."

"My lips are sealed," Ben firmly replied.

"I assumed it only for grave reasons, after I began to try and find my poor father. After Yank rescued me from the pit I assumed the disguise in which you first saw me—that of Zelda. I lived at her cabin, and as there were no visitors the fact was not discovered. I never managed to imitate her voice well—"

"I discovered the truth the first time I saw the real Zelda."

"No doubt. As Julian Morincy, however, I was at home, having often heard Frenchmen speak with a dialect. I took that part to be near Langleigh, and try to learn where my unfortunate father was. My womanhood rebelled against the disguise, but did not my motive

justify it? It was shame which prevented me from confiding in you, for both Yank and I felt that you were worthy of all confidence. I was a woman in unwomanly attire; hence, as I have said, my reserve. But I have always had faith in you."

"I thank you for that."

"Of course," added Vivian, "it was I whom you, Yank and noble Trail-Lifter escorted to the mountain that night. Owing to the delay in the completion of the telegraph line I laid aside my disguise as Morincy for awhile, and went to see Zelda, whom I had learned to love as a sister. You remember the night; it was when you left me at the cave."

"I do remember it, indeed," Ben replied, smiling as he recalled his mental perplexities of that occasion.

There was a stir at one side, and it was announced that Langleigh was conscious. Buckingham passed through the line and gained view of the dying man, who was looking in a strange, fixed way at Imogene.

"Girl," said the fallen magnate, hoarsely, "do you know who you are caring for?"

"I know you are a suffering man," Imogene replied.

"A dying one, too. Girl, you have said that you are not my daughter, and you are right; but do you know whose child you are?"

Imogene started.

"No," she faintly answered.

Langleigh closed his eyes, and seemed to meditate deeply; then they were suddenly opened again.

"Why shouldn't I speak out?" he murmured. "My power is gone, and my life is fast ebbing. I will speak!"

His gaze wandered until it encountered the face of Ben Buckingham.

"I thought I should find you here," he said, grimly. "It is well, Richard Mainwaring, that you should witness the death of your father's slayer. Ah! I am almost gone. Mainwaring, you had a sister once. What became of her?"

Blacklock Ben started, and flashed a quick glance at Imogene.

She was drowned by the upsetting of a boat—at least, it was supposed—"

"Only supposed!" interrupted Langleigh. "I hated your father because he exposed a business trick of mine, and, not content with slaying him, I stole his baby girl, making it seem that she was drowned. She lived—she now lives. Listen, all! I swear with my dying breath that she whom you have known as Imogene Langleigh is really Stella Mainwaring, and the sister of yonder man!"

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### THE LAST REVELATION.

LANGLEIGH pointed for a moment at Ben, and then his nerveless hand fell to his side. Plainly, the end was near.

"The proof—my money—all," he gasped, "may be found—in the bank—at St. Louis."

He had feebly dragged a well-worn bank-book from his pocket.

"This will guide you," he added.

The book fell from his grasp; he tried to start up; then every muscle gave way, and Nelson Langleigh was done with life forever. The spectators gazed with silent awe; then Buckingham picked up the bank-book, and as she did a sheet of paper fluttered from its leaves and fell at the feet of Abel Gault. The latter secured it; he read something written thereon, and then uttered a cry.

"Listen to me!" he exclaimed. "This paper makes plain more of Langleigh's work. It is a letter written to me in Langleigh's care, and bears date at St. Louis only a week ago. It is as follows:

"'Abandon search for Philip Templeton. He is an innocent man, and should never have been imprisoned. The real forger has confessed; Templeton is as innocent as you or I. Come home.'

"And to think," added Gault, "that after I have unjustly hounded Templeton, this news comes too late to save him. Turk Tobin confessed that Rooks murdered the unfortunate old man."

There was a hoarse exclamation, and Agrippa Ames, trembling like an aspen, stood before the officer.

"Philip Templeton lives!" he cried, in a wild voice, as he held out a shaking hand. "He lives, for I am he!"

The impediment had gone from his speech, and there was one, at least, who knew him. Vivian, still disguised as Julian Morincy, sprang forward and threw her arms about his neck, her face radiant with happiness.

"Father! oh! my father!" she cried.

Yank Yellowbird started forward and spoke hurriedly.

"Stan' back, all on ye! Give 'em air! This is a most egregious a'fectin' case, an' no intruders ain't wanted. Stan' back, all on ye, an' show that ye're o' good pedigree!"

And the mountaineer, mindful of Vivian's situation, almost drove them beyond view.

Philip Templeton was, indeed, found; and in due time he told how he had become Agrippa Ames. Shot by Bunker and Rooks, he was thrown from the cliff but miraculously escaped

serious injury; then he found an unknown dead man near, bruised by some fatal accident, and exchanged garments with him. This body was afterward buried by Bunker, as we have seen, but Templeton, unconscious of what had become of Vivian, and willing to dare all for her, actually entered Langleigh's employment after disguising himself, to find her. He dared trust no one, and had worked alone and almost without hope.

When all this had been told, Yank summoned father and daughter to breakfast, which had grown very late.

It was an enjoyable meal. The settlers' dangers were past; the Templetons were united once more; and Imogene had found a brother. Yank bubbled with good-humor, but when complimented for his work, persisted in giving all the praise to Trail-Lifter and Blacklock Ben.

"Them two has done the most, an' showed that their pedigree was o' the best kind. I've helped what I could when the egregious new-rology let up a bit, an' Miss Kitchen has done a heap by cheerin' us up in advarsity's dark hour. Miss Hannah, can't ye recite a poem fur us? Now don't blush so—though ter be sure, modesty is commendable in the young. Wal, mebber we kin do 'thout the poem."

Yank paused, helped himself to a generous bite of meat, leveled his potent fore-finger at Ben, and added:

"Benjamin, I wish my cousin, the poet, was hyar. She was a master o' pensive sentiment, an' when she had been through the spellin'-book a few times, an' got all the tender an' lovin' words she could find, she'd harness 'em up in teams, with common, ev'ry-day words as traces an' neck-yokes. I've often held my breath an hour on a stretch listenin' ter her, an' I consait it was egregious a'fectin'. I couldn't onderstan' what 'twas about, but it te'ched me ter the quick. Thar's suthin' erbout poetry I like; it's harmless, an' it soothes the narvous system. Hev another slice o' meat, Miss Kitchen? We leave hyar inside an hour, bound straight ter the civilized world, an' the easiest way ter carry provision is ter eat 'em. Don't be bashful, Miss Kitchen. Benjamin, when ye git ter St. Louis, buy a cargo o' fryin'-pans an' a canary-bird fur me, will ye? I want 'em, bad. Wal, ef you're all done, we'll leave hyar, fur I don't see as we kin gain anything by startin' a colony up hyar in a hole in the rocks. The skirmishes is all past, an' I must say we've done wal; we hev done very wal—yes, we've done most egregious wal, sir!"

Medicine Springs lay in ruins, and when the party reached it they passed on without delay. At Red Rock there was a separation. Some of the settlers preferred to remain there; others went on south.

Yank Yellowbird and Trail-Lifter turned their faces to the west and went with no other companion. They were at home wherever night overtook them.

The lapse of time since that day has made some changes. Buckingham, *alias* Mainwaring, is a St. Louis merchant, and he calls his wife "Vivian." With them lives Philip Templeton. Their next-door neighbors are John Kirk and his wife. Their troubles are past, but they often think of the events at Medicine Springs, near which are the unmarked graves of Langleigh, Bunker, Rooks and Tobin.

Montclair, who survived the massacre, is in a Colorado prison; Todd has not been heard from since his flight. He escaped, and it is possible that he reformed.

The remnant of the Panthers came to grief in a foray, and were almost wholly destroyed. From the time they applied the torch to "Big Medicine" no one thought of living there. It is almost forgotten now, and only a blackened ruin.

Philip Templeton finds his latter days as peaceful as any man could wish, and Vivian's happiness makes him wholly satisfied. When he charged Langleigh with the crime of Granite Tower he did so on the strength of information received from a fellow convict—he had no actual knowledge of how the elder Mainwaring died.

Zelda, the half-blood, remained near Red Rock, and finally married an honest white hunter. She was well rewarded by Vivian for her unselfish devotion and loyalty.

Hannah Kitchen was not so fortunate. She did not win Yank, and, somehow, he forgot to send the promised frying-pan. She still bears her unromantic name, is a victim to her "inner being," and is in great danger of remaining a lone woman to the end of time.

News occasionally comes from Yank Yellowbird and Trail-Lifter, and in every case they appear as champions of the worthy and persecuted. In times of peace their movements are aimless, for Nevermiss is never so happy as when he is in some wild place, enjoying the scenes most dear to him.

His name is a synonym for valor and honor, and even when he claims to be suffering with "new-rology," he does not forget the claims of his "pedigree."

The Yellowbird record will never be sullied by any act of his.

THE END.



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